

“Theatre of the ~~Censored~~”:

How Contemporary Chinese Artists **Subvert** Commercial Theatre Censorship

Ava Blum, Theatre & Human Rights Departments
Supervised by Prof. Yizhou Huang, Theatre Department

ACT 1: Introduction

Following the government crackdown and massacre of the 1989 Tiananmen Square Student Democracy Protests, China entered its **post-Mao “reform and opening up” era**, embracing global capitalist exchanges with democratic-presenting nations while still domestically operating as an authoritarian regime. The tension between China’s presentation of neoliberal values and the exercise of censorship-control has created a complex dynamic for **Chinese artists in the commercial theatre scene**, who must navigate the elusivity of a censorship system that strives to appear invisible.

Because mainstream commercial productions must obtain a permit to legally perform, China’s commercial theatre industry is often seen as a space where only propaganda is approved; however, **content-censorship is exercised on a case-by-case basis**. In ensuring artists **cannot identify clear boundaries, they are forced to “guesstimate” through self-censorship**. The reliance on individual judgement, then, creates **simultaneous danger and potential** for contemporary artists to express provocative ideas.

This paper examines how some of today’s Chinese theatremakers have learned to find, if not create, this “potential” for subverting commercial censorship, transcending commercial theatre’s content-regulations.

What type of censorship is exerted upon Chinese theatremakers, and what possibilities for innovation persist in spite of it? With authoritarianism globally on the rise, including in the US, **it’s more urgent than ever to understand: how do artists in censored societies combat the limitations on their freedom through the subversive language encoded in creative expression?**

ACT 2: The Purpose

By examining how today’s Chinese theatremakers persist in expressing topics or viewpoints typically subjected to CCP content-censorship, this research identifies key theatrical and narrative techniques that anyone (in China and beyond) can utilize to communicate their stories and opinions with one another in spite of surveillance and censorship. As long as art is alive, so is everyone’s ability to express their beliefs.

ACT 3: Methods Used

To demonstrate the scope of commercial theatre challenging the censorship regulation status quo, I analyzed two 21st-century Chinese commercial theatre productions as individual case studies with separate theoretical models:

APOLLONIA (2020, prod. Focustage), an ongoing Shanghai musical

→ I attended a show in-person!

- analyzed subversive staging/narrative tactics
- analyzed audience reactions

→ **Theoretical frameworks/concepts:**

- Kyewon Kim’s application of Chang Kyung-Sup’s **“compressed modernity” theory** to South Korea’s commercial musical theatre industry → I extend this to China’s CENSORSHIP context
- **China’s Danmei genre** (a subgenre of East Asia’s “Boy’s Love”) homoerotic media and literature primarily written by-and-for straight women that has been increasingly policed

DA XIANSHENG (2016, dir. Wang Chong), a banned production

→ watched the recorded video production to analyze subversive staging tactics

→ interviewed Wang and one of the actors, Zhen Cheng

- used the testimonies to understand China’s subjective censorship process

ACT 4: Findings



**Shhh...!!! censorship...
SCAN ^^ TO SEE
THE FINDINGS!**

ACT 5: What’s Next

- In spite of persistent censorship, these **commercial Chinese artists show how harnessing the intimacy of live theatre can transcend content-surveillance.**
- **The audience-performer relationship is a unique aspect of live theatre that makes censorship difficult compared to other forms of media consumption. Like Chinese censorship, in-person human connections are unpredictable, and therefore powerful.**
- Going forward, I envision applying these artists’ innovative tactics of engineering “hidden languages” with their audiences by collaborating with artists, children and ordinary people in communities facing restrictions on their freedom of expression—whether in China or even the US, based on the Trump administration’s recent efforts to censor diversity in the arts through withdrawing federal funding from various educational and artistic institutions.

CURTAIN CALL: Special Thanks to ...

- **Professor Yizhou Huang**, who nourished me with her adept insights and resource recommendations throughout my research process. I couldn’t have asked for a more perfect mentor for this topic!
- **My family**, who made it possible for me to attend and analyze a live showing of *Apollonia* during our summer trip to Shanghai!
- **My interviewees Wang Chong and Zhen Cheng**, for sharing their time and experiences during each of our conversations.
- **The Laidlaw Foundation**, for its generous support.

CREDITS (References)

Please scan **this QR code** → for the full references and bibliography I used in my research. For further inquiries regarding these sources, email azb2110@barnard.edu.



Laidlaw Scholars Program
BARNARD COLLEGE



Barnard College Laidlaw Leadership & Research Program,
2024