“Theatre of the Censored”:

How Contemporary Chinese Artists Subvert Commercial Theatre Censorship

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Abstract

With China's post-Mao era shift towards neoliberal reform, contemporary Chinese commercial theatre has emerged as a vehicle where theatermakers communicate sociopolitical criticism by navigating the boundaries between two government opposing interests: cultivation of a vibrant market-oriented entertainment industry, and suppression of dissent. Through analyzing experimental director Wang Chong's banned 2016 production, *Da Xiansheng*, and the homoeroticism in Focustage's ongoing musical *Apollonia*, this paper argues these theatremakers have re-engineered the spectator-performer relationship in order to subversively communicate with their audiences, revealing China's commercial theatre scene as an underestimated platform for pushing the perceived boundaries of censorship. By examining the shows' design choices and identifying the differences in their commercial censorship experiences, this paper examines how Chinese artists successfully transcend commercial theatre's heightened content-regulations. Through applying Chang Kyung-Sup's "compressed modernity" theory in South Korea towards analyzing *Appollonia*'s ongoing commercial success within China's capitalist-censorship society, and interviewing Wang Chong himself on how *Da Xiansheng*'s ban influenced his current approach to staging, this paper builds a more nuanced understanding of artists' ongoing innovations and adaptations within the confines of censorship. The insights from these case studies contribute to an understanding of art as a tool anyone can use to express their beliefs in spite of oppression. As long as art is alive, so is peoples' ability to express their beliefs—no matter what form that may take.

Introduction

As an aspiring actor and artist, I've grown wary of the second Trump administration's encroachment upon the right to free expression and dissent. After firing board members of the John

F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts and appointing himself the board chair,[1] President Trump announced he would use his self-appointed power to ensure the Kennedy Center's content is "not going to be 'woke.'"[2] Trump has already promised to ban future drag shows for "targeting our youth."[3] America often frames China as a foil to contrast its self-declared values of democracy and freedom; however, Trump's recent actions at the Kennedy Center are reminiscent of China's government under Xi Jinping, whose regime censors content that fails to conform to his vision of a docile, homogenized society. 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?

My research answers this question by investigating two 21st-century Chinese commercial theatre productions in the post-Mao "reform and opening up" era, typically defined by China's 1980s-onwards shift towards economic reform, its embrace of global capitalism, and its presentation as a neoliberal society.[4] Following the government crackdown and massacre of the 1989 Tiananmen Square Student Democracy Protests, China has gradually re-established itself as a hegemon on the world stage whose interests lie in engaging with democratic-presenting nations while simultaneously operating domestically as an authoritarian regime. The tension between this presentation of neoliberal values and the exercise of censorship-control has created a complex dynamic for Chinese artists in the commercial theatre scene. Though content-censorship has been exercised throughout Chinese history, it has evolved in fluctuating "waves of openness and repression,"[5] making it difficult

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[1] Travis M. Andrews and Ben Brasch, "Trump says he will fire Kennedy Center board members, appoint himself chairman," *The Washington Post*, February 7, 2025, https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/2025/02/07/trump-kennedy-center/.

[2] Elliott, Philip. "Why Trump's Takeover of the Kennedy Center Will Reverberate in Hollywood and Beyond." *Time Magazine*, February 12, 2025. https://time.com/7221538/donald-trump-kennedy-center/.

[3] Andrews and Ben Brasch, "Trump says he will fire Kennedy Center board members, appoint himself chairman."

[4] Clayton Press, "Art and China after 1989, Theatre of the World at the Guggenheim Museum, New York," *Forbes*, Dec 21, 2017, https://www.forbes.com/sites/claytonpress/2017/12/21/art-and-china-after-1989-theatre-of-the-world-at-the-guggenheim-museum-new-york/.

[5] Carol Fisher Sorgenfrei, "Orientalizing the Self: Theatre in China after Tiananmen Square," accessed 1 June 2025, *TDR (1988-)* 35, no. 4 (1991), *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2307/1146171, 170.

to delineate the boundaries of what content is permitted at a given time. As renowned experimental theatremaker Wang Chong told me in an interview, the government "keep[s] you guessing. They want to keep themselves mysterious so that they are more powerful. Your self-censorship would have killed most of your ideas that might go out of your way."[6] Reflecting on his initial confidence to stage *Da Xiansheng*, his most high-profile and politically-explicit show, Wang misjudged the Xi administration's political leniency when he first came to power in 2013: "We actually took the political boundary [...] from the [...] Hu Jintao, Wen Jiabao era to apply it to the [Xi] era."[7] The 2009 commercial approval of Wang's *The Vagina Monologues* staging led him "to assume that these [Xi] years would be more open," too.[8] It took *Da Xiangsheng*'s ban for Wang to realize the boundary lines had silently shifted.

Limits and Loopholes: Chinese-Content Censorship within Commercial Theatre

What type of censorship is exerted upon Chinese theatremakers, and what possibilities for innovation persist in spite of it? Non-commercial theatre has more leniency to bypass conventional content-censorship because it is not subjected to government regulations, whereas mainstream ticket-selling productions must obtain a commercial permit. Over a Facetime interview I conducted with him in July 2025, Wang explained how "each time you want to perform something, even if it's the same piece, same venue, you have to apply again [...]. [M]aybe it's the new leadership on the district level, maybe it's the new political climate, [...] but somehow they have the authority to say, 'your previous approval doesn't matter.'"[9] For this reason, the commercial theatre industry is often seen as a space where only propaganda or "neutral" entertainment is approved, squandering any chance of innovation; however, such assumptions overlook the simultaneous power and vulnerability

[6] Wang Chong, interview by Ava Blum, Facetime, July 15, 2025.
[7] Wang Chong, interview.
[8] Wang Chong, interview.
[9] Wang Chong, interview.

inherent to Chinese content-censorship: its paradoxically pervasive and elusive presence. According to June Zhu, existing commercial permit requirements are intentionally vague, with "definitions of such concepts as social order, morality, and obscenity remain[ing] ambiguous."[10] That ambiguity empowers censors to subjectively issue content restrictions, with minimal guidelines holding them to a consistent or predictable standard. Depending on the regional government and CCP organization overseeing a performance's location, the venue, the performance's perceived scope and its subject matter, content-censorship is exercised on a case-by-case basis. The lack of a "hard line" means there is simultaneous danger and potential for contemporary artists who take creative risks, where censorship operates "as a form of artistic repression, but also potentially a process than can be 'an impetus to stylistic innovation' (Levine 1995, 2)."[11]

Many artists have sought to find, if not create, this "potential" for subverting commercial censorship. I analyze FocusStage's ongoing musical *Apollonia* (2020) as well as Wang Chong's now-banned 2016 production *Da Xiansheng* and its impact on his artistic evolution.[12] Together, these case studies help redefine notions of Chinese commercial theatre and its possibilities, demonstrating the scope of theatre challenging the status quo. In her Guangzhou-based study, Zhu examines "the struggles experienced and loopholes exploited by artists to ensure that their work reaches an audience [...], but also that their work retains its integrity in the process."[13] I expand Zhu's scholarship of independent experimental theatre to examine this process in mainstream commercial theatre, where the innovative "loopholes" artists employ to preserve artistic integrity are complicated by economic motives, from *Apollonia*'s "compressed modernity" design, which exploits the censored

[10] June Zhu, "The Detour Around Censorship: Private Theatres and Independent Performance Groups in Guangzhou, China," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Theatre Censorship*, ed. Anne Etienne and Graham Saunders (Palgrave Macmillan, 2025), https://link-springer-com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/book/10.1007/978-3-031-67299-6, 363.
[11] Zhu, "The Detour Around Censorship," 12.
[12] Wang's show is known in Chinese as 大先生, or *Dà Xiānshēng*, which roughly translates to "Mr. Big" in English. For the purposes of continuity in this paper, I'll refer to the show by its Chinese name, *Da Xiansheng*.
[13] Zhu, "The Detour Around Censorship," 14.

interests of a lucrative fandom, to *Da Xiansheng* and the $300,000 contract that was set to fund its national tour. As two vastly different productions who both subversively convey controversial topics within the industry, *Apollonia* and *Da Xiansheng*'s co-existence exhibits the diversity of artistic innovation that exists within an industry often perceived as stifled by government-regulated propaganda.

***Danmei* on the Down-low: *Apollonia* Seeks to Subvert Censors, Not Society**

Large venues like the Asia Building, an eight-floor commercial venue known as "Vertical Broadway," house many of Shanghai's musical theatre productions. These shows do not seek to be controversial or political; instead, Focustage, the production company behind *Apollonia* and other popular, formulaic musicals currently showing in "vertical broadway," target specific fanbases who will guarantee them a long-term, abundant audience.[14] In the case of *Apollonia*, that audience belongs to an increasingly censored genre, *danmei*. *Danmei* (which translates to "indulging in beauty"[15]) is a Chinese subgenre of Japan and broader East Asia's "Boys' Love" fiction, which depicts homoerotic relationships "written [...] by and for heterosexual women."[16] Envisioning homosexual relationships through a female gaze allows these women to design a "fictional masculine ideal [which] combines the best attributes of a male exterior with female sensitivities," a sexually-liberating outlet from the constraining, heteronormative "conventions of female sexuality."[17] However, through using these queer narratives that authorities, according to Herald Thibault's report for *Le Monde Magazine*, "see as a challenge to traditional family values," *Apollonia*'s creators seek to advance neither LGBTQ+ or

[14] Yi Ziyi and Ni Wei, "Stirring Up Drama," *News China Magazine*, updated July 1, 2025, http://newschinamag.com/newschina/articleDetail.do?article_id=8233&section_id=34&magazine_id=115.

[15] Herald Thibault, "Chinese police crack down on young women writing homoerotic fiction," *Le Monde*, July 15, 2025, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2025/07/15/chinese-police-crack-down-on-young-women-writing-homoerotic-fiction_6743377_4.html?utm_campaign=feed&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=later-linkinbio#.

[16] Ran Xi, "Masculinities in Chinese Boys' Love Stories: Female Imaginations, Market Forces and State Influence," *Journal of Gender Studies* (2024), dx.doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2024.2408403, 8.

[17] Xi, "Masculinities in Chinese Boys' Love Stories: Female Imaginations, Market Forces and State Influence," 2.

women's rights;[18] Rather, the theatremakers are capitalizing off of the gay romance narrative because they know it is a lucrative market in China, with an extensive female fanbase.[19]

Some scholars believe *Apollonia*'s commodified representation of queerness limits "the subversive capability of these narratives" in Chinese society.[20] However, the policing of *danmei* creators makes the mere existence of *danmei* content inherently subversive, in the context of censorship efforts against it. China has recently escalated its content-censorship efforts to target *danmei* creators, arresting and interrogating "dozens of women authors who have written *danmei* e-books," according to Thibualt.[21] It is significant that *theatrical* productions of the genre, like *Apollonia,* have managed to remain untouched. According to Wu ChangChang for *Sixth Tone,* "musicals are one of the few forms of entertainment that have evaded increased government scrutiny of homoerotic content, at least so far."[22] This case study of *Apollonia* sheds light on how *danmei* artists use resources and strategies unique to live performance to survive in China today. As Xi argues, "with the state censoring *danmei* content, [*danmei*] creates a unique cultural space where queer desires are cautiously explored."[23] Within a censorship society, the existence of such a space is, in itself, a subversive success for its creators and fans.

The key to *Apollonia*'s subversive portrayal of homoeroticism onstage is the show's understanding of its own audience, which allows the show to curate its loyal crowd of *danmei* fans who repeatedly return to satisfy their "dangerous" desires. Filtering its audience demographic to a specific fandom means the majority of attendees will interpret the show's content in a specific way that general viewers may not, allowing *danmei* fans and censors alike to leave satisfied. *Apollonia*

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[18] Thibault, "Chinese police crack down on young women writing homoerotic fiction."
[19] Xi, "Masculinities in Chinese Boys' Love Stories: Female Imaginations, Market Forces and State Influence," 1.
[20] Xi, "Masculinities in Chinese Boys' Love Stories: Female Imaginations, Market Forces and State Influence," 8.
[21] Thibault, "Chinese police crack down on young women writing homoerotic fiction."
[22] Wu Changchang, "How China's Musicals Lost Their Groove," *Sixth Tone*, Oct. 24, 2021, https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1008777.
[23] Xi, "Masculinities in Chinese Boys' Love Stories: Female Imaginations, Market Forces and State Influence," 3.

attracts *danmei* fans by recruiting Korean theatre scholar Hyewon Kim's interpretation of "compressed modernity."[24] Originated by sociologist Chang Kyung-sup, this framework depicts how commercial entrepreneurs cushion the disruptive potential of unorthodox or taboo identities by marketing them as commodities that can be attributed to Western influence (or infiltration) upon increasingly globalized East Asian societies. As Robert Burton-Bradley writes for the *South China Morning Post*, "One increasingly common narrative being pushed by government officials is that LGBT culture is a 'Western' idea that was imported into China."[25] Applying Kim's Korea-based research to a Chinese context, I argue *Apollonia* bypasses conventional content-censorship by utilizing attributes of Korea's "compressed modernity" musical theater industry: first, implementing a "multicast system" musical, where each actor plays multiple parts in the show (1);[26] Secondly, employing a rotating roster of actors who alternate filling the three lead roles each night, maximizing commercial potential through attracting a "revolving-door" audience of female fans who are incentivized to return to see a new set of attractive "star-studded choices" each time (2).[27] This repetitive structure filters the audience demographic to primarily attract a loyal *danmei* fanbase of attendees who, attracted to the male performers, are invested in the rotating, multicast, male-oriented format. Meanwhile, general audience members unaware of this theatre system or *danmei* would not identify the sexualized subtext because they aren't attending the show to look for it. In this sense, the theatremakers and their target audience work together to create a show with subversive content that fulfills their capitalist and taboo desires, respectively—a show that survives—and thrives—in China's commercial theatre scene.

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[24]Hyewon Kim, "Domesticating Hedwig: Neoliberal Global Capitalism and Compression in South Korean Musical Theater," *The Journal of Popular Culture*, vol 51 no. 2 (2018), dx.doi.org/10.1111/jpcu.12669, 422.

[25]Robert Burton-Bradley, "China's LGBT community caught up in Xi Jinping's widening crackdowns on big tech, education and celebrities," *South China Morning Post*, Oct. 7, 2021, https://www.scmp.com/news/people-culture/gender-diversity/article/3151504/chinas-lgbt-community-caught-xi-jinpings.

[26] Kim, "Domesticating Hedwig: Neoliberal Global Capitalism and Compression in South Korean Musical Theater," 422.

[27] Kim, "Domesticating Hedwig: Neoliberal Global Capitalism and Compression in South Korean Musical Theater," 432-33.

Apollonia's story setting is another element of "compressed modernity" that allows the show to evade censors, distancing the queer content from its Chinese audience. In her analysis of gender and sexuality in Korean musical theater, Kim posits that the "compressed modernity" framework enabled the "threat" of transgender and queer identities to be diluted by their affiliation with Western media, which allowed the musical industry to present them as "an aspect of neoliberal modernity that offers viewers a glimpse into a foreign society" (Kim 435) instead of suggesting they are present in Korean society. *Apollonia* borrows this strategy through its setting at a struggling bar during the 1930s Great-Depression in New York City. As the *UK Independent* notes, "[w]hat makes *danmei* distinct is its fusion of romantic relationships between men with broader narrative styles, often historical fantasy."[28] The foreign place and time period alienates *Apollonia*'s younger Shanghai audience from the content's perceived relevance to their lives, reinforcing the CCP-promoted narrative of homosexuality as "a Western tool to undercut the Party's control over civil society."[29]

Another way *Apollonia* satisfies its *danmei* fanbase while concealing its taboo themes is through the "play-within-a-play," a plot device that renders the presence of gay dynamics as "fictional" *within* the show itself. As Xi writes, "Owing to such strict surveillance and sanitizing efforts on *danmei*, [...] writers cautiously write in accordance with the state policy by metaphorically framing the intercourse, rendering explicit sex scenes allusive and the real intimate relationship into what informants jokingly called 'socialist bromance."[30] The play-within-a-play premise reinforces the idea of the "bromance" by making it easy to attribute every sexually-questionable interaction between the protagonists, actor duo Oscar and Richard, to their backstories as professional actors. Showcasing queerness under the guise of "pretending" for the characters themselves means general

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[28] Shahana Yasmin, "Mounting Public Anger in China as Writers of Gay Erotic Fiction Face Prosecution: 'Unreasonable and Ignorant,'" *UK Independent*, July 1, 2025, https://www.independent.co.uk/asia/china/gay-erotica-china-danmei-writers-arrested-b2779488.html.

[29] Ahana Roy, "Going Straight for the Gay: The CPC and China's LGBTQ+ Community - Part 1," *Organization for Research on China and Asia* (ORCA), August 2, 2023, https://orcasia.org/article/375/going-straight-for-the-gay.

[30] Xi, "Masculinities in Chinese Boys' Love Stories: Female Imaginations, Market Forces and State Influence," 8.

audiences and censors alike do not find those implied dynamics to reflect anything in Chinese society. While "fictionalized queerness" reduces the social impact that the show could have in advancing gay representation and rights, the tactic is a useful vehicle for *Apollonia*'s creators to capitalize off such issues in a surveillance society that otherwise restricts exposure to and discourse on the topic.

Much of *Apollonia*'s plot revolves around the protagonists, vaudeville actors Richard and Oscar, as they are forced to rehearse and perform two final plays for the Italian mafia, who have seized control of their struggling bar venue and will permanently shut it down, after the final show. *Apollonia*'s plot teases the tension between the fictional worlds of the plays Richard and Oscar must perform, and the real-life conflicts and desires the actors encounter. *Apollonia* uses that dichotomy to engineer moments of homoeroticism that seep through the precarious boundaries separating the fictional and real-life worlds its characters navigate. While both the plays within *Apollonia* have convoluted plotlines, what remains clear onstage are the protagonists' cross-dressing displays in scenes where the male characters must rehearse or perform those plays, frequently portraying a heterosexual couple. In the duet "My Baby," Richard and Oscar rehearse a romance scene where Oscar plays the female love-interest.[31] The choreography has the actors kneel down while they sing, facing each other so closely they nearly kiss. When I saw *Apollonia*, I observed how the male performers deliberately angled themselves towards the female audience members closest to the edge of the stage, giving those women a display of sexual tension worthy of the front row seats they'd paid for. As Kim notes, "Drag performance's theatricalized, cross-dressed bodies enhanced a show's spectacle, bent to the production's commercial purposes to entertain the women spectators."[32] The homoerotic intimacy underlying this scene, and many others, was concealed from censors by the established context of Richard and Oscar being actors in "rehearsal."

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[31] *Apollonia*, produced by Focustage, The Asia Building, Shanghai, August 4, 2025.
[32]Kim, "Domesticating Hedwig: Neoliberal Global Capitalism and Compression in South Korean Musical Theater," 435.

Although *Apollonia*'s play-within-the play premise enables its queer-coded moments to be dismissed as the protagonists' being in-character the show teases the possibility of those moments being the protagonists' true feelings for one another. *Apollonia*, knowing its fanbase will entertain the latter narrative, exploits the slippage for cheap laughs. When Richard and Oscar perform their final show at their soon-to-be-shut-down bar, the scene involves a woman (played by Richard) about to jump off the Brooklyn Bridge, thinking she's been abandoned by her male lover. When her lover (played by Oscar) returns, surprising her, the couple embrace in silence for a moment which lasted so long in the theatre that I began questioning whether Richard and Oscar were still in character as the couple, or genuinely hugging one another. *Apollonia* teases at the latter, for Richard breaks the embrace by awkwardly patting Oscar on the back until he lets go, eliciting laughter from viewers who recognized the homoerotic tension underlying their characters' interaction. In the following scene, Richard scolds Oscar for improvising that moment of intimacy, changing their play's ending from a tragic to happy romance. By including this plot-twist, *Apollonia* further fulfills *danmei* audience fantasies by implanting the possibility of true romance between the protagonists.

The play-within-the-play's surprise ending mirrors Richard and Oscar's reality. After they've satisfied the mafia with their performance, the characters mournfully part ways for what they think is the last. Much like the lady he just played, Richard laments how Oscar has gone on to get married, abandoning him forever. Suddenly, just like the plot-twist in the scene they'd just performed together, Oscar reappears, announcing he is back to stay by Richard's side because he and his fiancee have suddenly split up. The protagonists then learn the mafia enjoyed their show so much that they've decided to restore the bar, meaning Oscar and Richard can continue working and living together. By having the tragic-turned-happy ends of *Apollonia*'s play-within-the-play and the protagonists' main plotline thematically parallel each other, *Apollonia* encourages its *danmei* fans to deduce a homosexual romance between the protagonists.

Apollonia embodies China's "compressed modernity" framework, allowing the show to reconcile its profit-driven interests and the threat of content-censorship. By borrowing from Korea's commercial musical theatre structure which commodifies male queerness, *Appollonia* attracts a loyal *danmei* fanbase seeking specific (homoerotic) content. Despite my limited Chinese proficiency and never having consumed *danmei* media or attended a Chinese musical, understanding "compressed modernity" allowed me to recognize queer-coded moments as the production's intentional efforts to appeal to *danmei* fans. Meanwhile, my mom, a native Chinese speaker and fellow first-time Chinese musical attendee entered, unaware of the show's *danmei*-marketing, and did not interpret any moments as queer-coded— she attributed all moments of implied intimacy and cross-dressing as nothing more than the characters' participation in the play-within-the-play storyline. The distinction between me and my mom's interpretations of these moments demonstrates how, by engineering an audience attuned to a specific subtext, *Apollonia* subversively portrays queerness, its commercial selling point, while managing to bypass content-censors.

Wang Chong's *Da Xiansheng*: Risking a Ban for a Bigger Cause

Navigating content-censorship is a far more challenging task when one's artistic pursuit is intentionally political, as opposed to profitable. Compared to *Apollonia*'s "compressed modernity" formula, experimental directors like Wang Chong do not design their theatre around pursuing commercial viability; Wang incorporates sociopolitical taboos with the intention of making a societal impact, not a quick buck.[33] While *Appollonia*'s creators exploit a niche fandom's interests for commercial profit, Wang puts his artistry and political ideas first, seeking to resonate with all Chinese people. To understand *Da Xiansheng*'s eventual ban, *Apollonia*'s ongoing success at bypassing

[33] Yizhou Huang, "Performing Lost Politics: *Yijing yisheng Yibusheng* (Ibsen in One Take) (2012) and Wang Chong's Double-Coded New Wave Theatre," *Asian Theatre Journal*, vol. 27 no. 2 (2020), *Project MUSE*, https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/atj.2020.0034.

censors is a helpful contextualization. Despite *danmei*'s recent scrutiny among authorities, the topic does not express *political* dissent. In my June 2025 Zoom interview with Zhen Cheng, who played both Lu Xun's mother and Xu Guangping (Lu's student-turned-lover) for the first half of *Da Xiansheng*'s run, Cheng speculated, "if this APOLLONIA talks about prohibition-era in New York, it feels more distanced—not specifically talking about politics in [a] specific era in China. [...] Even though LGBTQ activism is 'publicly' not allowed in China, it's not as sensitive [...], especially when a production is regarded as targeting a regime."[34] The shows do not have an equal grounds for comparison regarding their censorship subversion journeys because they were created with different intentions and contained content posing different levels of direct "threat" to the CCP. But despite the drastic differences between these creators' artistic intentions, they both employ a shared tactic for subverting censors: the "inclusion of spectators in meaning-making."[35]

As a show targeting a specific demographic—gay romance for heterosexual women—*Apollonia*'s creators only sought to "include" a specific type of spectator in the "meaning-making" experience, limiting the scope of its "provocative" influence on Chinese society. By contrast, Wang's *Da Xiangsheng* was eventually banned because his message—dissent towards the CCP's hypocritical use of communist ideology to justify their authoritarian actions—was intended for all Chinese civilians, and a direct challenge to the CCP. "[Even] the dumbest people 'get' the vibe in the theatre [...]. You know there's something dangerous going on, even though [you] cannot pinpoint every thing, every character, every meaning," Wang told me.[36] Since *Da Xiansheng*'s 2016 banning, however, Wang continues engaging audiences in interactive "meaning-making," having shifted his theatremaking tactics to design performances geared towards various unconventional audience sizes, primarily limited to a smaller range of people per show. Even though

[34] Zhen Cheng, interview by Ava Blum, Zoom, June 26, 2025.
[35] Huang, "Performing Lost Politics: *Yijing yisheng Yibusheng* (Ibsen in One Take) (2012) and Wang Chong's Double-Coded New Wave Theatre," 414.
[36] Wang Chong, interview.

content-censorship makes it difficult for artists like Wang to showcase their political pieces at a conventionally large, mainstream scale, Wang's creative journey during and after *Da Xiansheng* is evidence that artists can still make intentionally provocative work within commercial theatre, redefining the relationship between the audience and the performance.

Da Xiansheng exhibited a short-term subversion of China's censorship enforcement, through its initial approval in Beijing and its later ban in Shanghai; in doing so, the show's lifespan reflects the paradoxical weakness and strength of China's subjective censorship-enforcement process. In a commercial theatre setting, the lack of clear censor guidelines creates discontinuity among censorship-administering authorities who issue different judgements, sometimes enabling provocative content to get exposure.[37] Based on my observations from watching the recorded copy of *Da Xiansheng,* as well as interviews I conducted with Wang and Zhen, I attribute *Da Xiansheng*'s initial success at subverting censors to three primary factors: (1) the play's legitimacy from receiving a government-issued award and from its celebrated subject matter, writer Lu Xun; (2) Wang's innovative use of the play's abstract dialogue and onstage film technology, which creates an "opposition between reality and virtuality"[38] that embeds dual layers of meaning to his staging; and (3) the different self-censorship standards within each city, venue and organization the show encountered on its tour. In spite of its eventual banning in Shanghai, *Da Xiansheng* managed to bypass several cities' censors prior, including Beijing, showcasing the production's inherently subversive qualities. *Da Xiansheng* is therefore a paramount case study that embodies how artists employ subversive tactics to showcase politically-explicit, dissentful pieces in China's commercial theatre scene. As Wang argues, "If [the censors] had known the danger beforehand, they would have

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[37] Sorgenfrei, "Orientalizing the Self: Theatre in China after Tiananmen Square," 178. → For instance, Sorgenfrei identifies Chinese ethnic minorities as a topic frequently exhibiting this authoritative fragmentation: "Officials connected with departments of culture [...] wish to maintain 'living fossils' as objects of research and as tourist attractions. Officials involved in the implementation of social policy, however, view divergent minority or traditional activities as threatening the goal of a homogeneous Chinese society."

[38] Huang, "Performing Lost Politics: *Yijing yisheng Yibusheng* (Ibsen in One Take) (2012) and Wang Chong's Double-Coded New Wave Theatre," 416.

stopped it before the [first] performance." Not only does this insight confirm *Da Xiansheng*'s subversive attributes, it demonstrates how all pieces can fall victim to the subjectivity of Chinese content-censorship, depending on the time and place.

Public Approval and Lu Xun's Legacy: Renowned Reputations as a Layer of Protection

The saying "reputation is everything" takes on new significance when used as a tool for censorship subversion. In reviewing Wang's body of work, Yizhou Huang identifies a recurring artistic throughline of "editing and reassembling classics to speak to contemporary realities."[39] While *Da Xiansheng* was eventually banned because the CCP perceived Wang's commentary on China's "contemporary reality" as too provocative, the show initially subverted potential censors thanks to the "classic" reputations of Wang as a director, the play itself, and the play's subject matter, Lu Xun (1881-1936). The Beijing News, a CCP-owned newspaper, awarded Wang "Experimental Artist of the Year 2012."[40] In 2014, the Beijing-based Lao She Literary Awards selected Li Jing's *Da Xiansheng* for Outstanding Dramatic Script—an honor Wang told me places the play in high regard among the likes of contemporary Beijing classics.[41]

Da Xiansheng imagines the deathbed reflections of Lu Xun, one of China's most celebrated writers. When censors reviewed Wang's proposal, the script being "already published" and awarded was another "layer of 'protection'" that led censors to assume "it should be fine…until they saw the performance."[42] While Wang's staging of the play insinuated Lu Xun would have protested the CCP's increasingly authoritarian governance, censors did not perceive these themes when approving the original script because the CCP has so heavily reclaimed Lu Xun's image for party propaganda.

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[39] Huang, "Performing Lost Politics: *Yijing yisheng Yibusheng* (Ibsen in One Take) (2012) and Wang Chong's Double-Coded New Wave Theatre," 400.
[40] Ping Pong Productions, "Wang Chong & Théâtre du Rêve Expérimental 2015 Projects," accessed September 1, 2025, https://pingpongarts.org/cn/production/wangchong-2015/.
[41] Wang Chong, interview.
[42] Wang Chong, interview.

Having supported China's 1911 Revolution which ended the Qing Dynasty, to promoting unity between China's competing Communist and Kuomintang parties in the fight against Japanese imperialism, Lu and his allegorical short stories advocated for marxist values of equality and solidarity among the youth generations and working-class civilians;[43] However, since Lu Xun's death preceded the CCP's official formation, the party later proclaimed him as a symbol to enhance their legitimacy and conceal their increasingly authoritarian rule.[44] By the time Wang proposed to stage it, the topic alone placed *Da Xiansheng* "within the range–within the party line—because it's about Lu Xun anyways."[45]

The creators of *Apollonia* placed their queer-coded story in an American setting, a tool of "compressed modernity" capitalism in which commodifying homoerotic content as a western product distances the content from being perceived as insinuating it is applicable to its audience, Chinese society. Meanwhile, since *Da Xiansheng*'s more "dangerous," overtly political message is specific to China, Wang's tactic for selling censors the illusion of "safety" couldn't come from engineering a foreign setting; Wang created a sense of "distance" between his content and its perceived influence on Chinese society by relying, ironically, on "closeness"—the familiarity that China associates with the play material.

Wang's experimental approach to staging, which he calls the "New Wave Theatre" movement, has enabled him to embed sociopolitical commentary in his Chinese shows while subverting censors. According to Huang, Wang (un)masks his political themes through postdramatic tactics, which "often [don't] engage with political issues head-on, but seek[...] to embed subversive messages in formal innovations."[46] In directing *Da Xiansheng*, Wang utilized the script's dense, poetic

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[43] Kirk Denton, "Lu Xun Biography," Ohio State University Modern Chinese Literature and Culture (MCLC) Resource Center, 2002, https://u.osu.edu/mclc/online-series/lu-xun/.

[44] Andreea Chiriță, "Memories of Wars and Revolutions in Wang Chong's Theatre," *Theatre Survey* 66.2 (2025), dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0040557424000267, 138.

[45] Wang Chong, interview.

[46] Huang, "Performing Lost Politics: *Yijing yisheng Yibusheng* (Ibsen in One Take) (2012) and Wang Chong's Double-Coded New Wave Theatre," 415.

language to buffer his political message from landing too overtly with censors, which enabled him to freely explore stage innovations as a subversive avenue to convey meaning. In my interview with Wang, he emphasized that those staging choices were what unveiled *Da Xiansheng*'s political themes, since the script's dense language "already serv[ed] as a barrier for the audience [...]. So in terms of staging, acting, making things clear, we [did] as much as possible so the text [was] understandable onstage."[47] When I interviewed Zhen, she described how the text, paired with Wang's politicized staging, initially allowed the show to bypass content-censorship because "verbally, no one's targeting any specific person or thing. So it's 'abstractly explicit,'" where, thanks to Wang's staging, "you know what they're talking [about], but at the same time, you cannot *say* what they're talking about."[48]

Another subversive aspect of Wang's staging is using live film cameras onstage, which allows Wang to draw parallels between Lu Xun's lifetime and ours.[49] Andrea Chiriță offers a comprehensive analysis of how Wang's time parallels "expos[e] young audiences to both known and unknown histories."[50] The cameras project live footage of the actors from specific angles that reveal Wang's encoded meaning beneath onstage action, including references to now-cleansed "unknown histories," like the true extent of damage inflicted by Mao's Cultural Revolution (Chiriță 138). Wang's camera strategy functions like *Appollonia*'s subversive "play-within-a-play" tactic in allowing both shows to incorporate their provocative content through an implied, rather than explicit, way. In *Da Xiansheng*, Wang's cameras make audiences feel like voyeurs into Lu Xun's life, inviting Chinese audiences to consider CCP surveillance in their own lives.

Coordinating Wang's stage-and-screen elements—the actors and the stage movie—is essential for conveying his meaning onstage, yet their simultaneity—a visually distracting and

[47] Wang Chong, interview.
[48] Zhen Cheng, interview.
[49] Huang, "Performing Lost Politics: *Yijing yisheng Yibusheng* (Ibsen in One Take) (2012) and Wang Chong's Double-Coded New Wave Theatre," 411. → Huang notes that Chong calls his film camera technique "*wutai dianying* (stage movie)," and regards it as "'the signature approach' of the New Wave Theatre."
[50] Chiriță, "Memories of Wars and Revolutions in Wang Chong's Theatre," 150.

sensorily demanding experience—also serves to cushion the provocative message from landing as overtly. In a scene where Lu Xun faces the audience, Wang's onstage film cameras project live footage of the actor's back onto the giant statue of a faceless Chairman Mao behind him, creating the effect that Lu is facing the statue.[51] In physically facing the statue through the angle made possible by the camera, Lu appears to symbolically be confronting Mao and the CCP. By turning to face the statue, Lu faces his onscreen reflection. Through the projection, Lu is presented to viewers as boxed—trapped? —within the statue, reflecting Wang's insinuation that Lu has been imprisoned as a symbol for the CCP's facade of fair governance. Scholars like Chiriță, through their extensive analysis on the nuanced symbolism of *Da Xiansheng*'s staging, affirm my notion that *Da Xiansheng*, in spite of its banning, was a subversive show that found innovative ways of expressing otherwise censored histories to younger generations of Chinese citizens who grew up with cleansed (or erased) narratives of China's leaders and events.

There is limited scholarship examining *Da Xiansheng*'s censorship journey itself, a journey reflective of the simultaneous strengths and weaknesses in China's subjective censorship system. The power of China's content-censorship lies in its ambiguity, which keeps all citizens precautionarily exercising self-censorship to avoid the real thing; in a commercial theatre context, this also means initial censorship checkpoints expect venues or organizations to exercise their own judgement in self-censoring pieces. With the first 5 runs of Wang's *The Vagina Monologues*, the venue's self-censorship was so wary of inciting government censors that it sacrificed their profit, lowering ticket pricing until it no longer qualified for needing "commercial" approval;[52] But with *Da Xiansheng*, the early venues' differing self-censorship standards actually enabled the provocative show to get exposure—a subversive feat, albeit short-lived, that was assisted by the system itself.

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[51] Wang Chong and Théâtre du Rêve Expérimental, "《大先生》 Lu Xun," accessed August 29, 2025, edited by Li Bowen, translated by David N.C. Hill, recorded live March 31, 2016, posted August 1, 2023, by @theatredureve, YouTube, 1:57:56, [unlisted link], 00:08:08.

[52] Wang Chong interview.

This paper argues that, beyond Wang's staging, the subjective self-censorship processes among *Da Xiansheng*'s tour venues influenced the show's approval in the cities preceding Shanghai. As Cheng put it, commercial theatre's relationship to content-censorship is "contingent [...]. [I]t relies on who you are dealing with."[53] For the Beijing leg of the tour, the censorship *Da Xiansheng* encountered were superficial adjustments requested by the venue ("Zhongguo guojia huajuyuan," the National Theatre of China[54]), and the National Arts Fund (NAF), the foundation contracting *Da Xiansheng* to its 40-show tour in exchange for $300,000. Requested alterations included concealing the "upper pockets of the statue" to lessen its resemblance to Mao and the "Zhongshan suit" he often wore.[55] If removing the pockets was the venue's effort to remove the critical light the show cast on Mao, the other part involved literally changing the lighting on Mao's statue, from a "highly symbolic" red to a "white light, a neutral" tone.[56]

Da Xiansheng completed 9 total runs across various cities before it was halted by the Shanghai Municipal Committee of the CCP ("Shànghǎi shì wěiyuánhuì"), who "*direct* the city government."[57] Indeed, once the Shanghai party committee alerted the Ministry of Culture, a government branch which oversaw the NAF, the NAF informed Wang *Da Xiansheng* could not continue without significant adjustments. However, according to Wang, "we kind of all knew that there was no chance": though the notice came from the NAF, Wang and his team knew it was "from an administrative power," since "there was no legal document so that we could present it to the media [...]. Whenever [the government] disapprove[s] of a performance, a staging, [or] a script, they almost don't give you any historical records."[58] For Wang, the biggest surprise regarding the Shanghai ban

[53] Zhen Cheng interview.
[54] Tarryn Chun, "Wang Chong and the Theatre of Im*media*cy: Technology, Performance, and Intimacy in Crisis," *Theatre Survey* 62 (2021), dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0040557421000211, 307.
[55] Wang Chong interview.
[56] Wang Chong interview.
[57] Wang Chong interview.
[58] Wang Chong interview.

was that it "overturn[ed] the decisions of previous organizations."[59] Since Beijing is where the central CCP and government preside, Shanghai taking the strictest actions reflects the unpredictability and differing standards among the institutions overseeing a show's commercial approval process.

Bouncing Back from *Da Xiansheng*: Wang Chong's Small Audience Strategy

Wang has adapted his theatrical approach following *Da Xiangsheng*'s ban, not by leaving the commercial industry, but by designing smaller spaces within it to re-engineer audience engagement in ways that bypass censors. When I asked whether this adjustment reduces his ability to maximize his messages' impact on Chinese audiences, Wang said the notions of "scope," "impact" and "exposure" are "basically terms for 'capitalism' in disguise."[60] To produce pieces on larger stages with more publicity and profit in the current political climate would require him to compromise his artistic integrity. *Apollonia* exhibits censorship-subverting innovation for the sake of "market-driven" survival, where "creators, especially those who write full-time, must cater to the taste of the audience for economic gains" (Xi 8) and therefore prioritize subversively conveying *danmei*, even if the storyline artistry gets convoluted in the process. Wang, on the other hand, defines true empowerment within the current content-censorship environment as creating theatre that doesn't alter its message or presentation for the sake of reaching a larger physical audience. If he tailored his content to appease commercial censors and reach more people, the messages he desires to express and his artistry would also be tailored. Subsequently, the "scope" and "impact" of his work would not matter, because the message conveyed would not be authentic to his vision.

Altering audience size created a new way for Wang to subversively communicate his ideas without sacrificing his artistic voice. Following *Da Xiansheng*'s ban, Wang began "the microtheatre" in 2019, a set of shows which were mostly commercially approved, but limited to small audiences.

[59] Wang Chong interview.
[60] Wang Chong interview.

"*Where do we come from? 2.0* had only 4 audience [members] each time [...]. *Time and Being 2.0* [...] had only 1 audience."[61] Limited-audience performances have spectators co-create meaning with the performers. As Zhai and Stenberg explain, "the content of the performance becomes a secondary element [...]. [T]he physical or linguistic expression of the actor can be thought of as improvisation generated in collaboration with the audience; on the other hand, the theater space is transformed into a living space, thus breaking through the limitations of the venue" (Yueqin and Stenberg 43).[62] The intimacy facilitated by such personal exchanges potentially resonates with each individual beyond the theatre, compared to if they shared the experience in a larger, mainstream setting. Wang's work within commercial spaces reshapes its very conventions, showing there are still ways in which artists can navigate the boundaries the government attempts to place on artistic dissent. In a show like *Apollonia*, "a normal commercial production [...], you want to draw a huge number of audiences first, THEN you start to design the project."[63] By contrast, Wang's experience demonstrates that commercial "success" is not solely defined by a show's ticket sales, but by the production's ability to convey the creator's artistic vision while sustaining regular performances, regardless of audience size.

Conclusion

Both *Apollonia* and Wang's journey (before and after *Da Xiansheng*) reflect the innovations of artists testing the boundaries of hyper-regulated commercial spaces. Despite the differing intentions behind their works' controversial content, both parties achieve their goals through a shared subversive tactic: understanding how to engineer their audiences. From Wang Chong's evolution following *Da*

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[61] Wang Chong interview.

[62] Yueqin Zhai, and Josh Stenberg. "Boundary-Crossing Experiments: Ecology of the Shanghai Avant-Garde Theater in the New Century." *Chinese Literature Today,* vol. 8, no. 2, 2019, pp. 38-44. *ProQuest*, http://ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/boundary-crossing-experiments-ecology-shanghai/docview/2354439513/se-2.

[63] Wang Chong interview.

Xiansheng and the structure of mainstream musicals like *Apollonia*, both cases exhibit how live theatre allows artists to convey politically provocative or socially taboo messaging within China's content-censored society. *Apollonia* limits its audience demographic, attracting those that can speak the *danmei* "language" encoded in the show; Through postdramatic, symbolic staging and various audience sizes, Wang has engineered spaces—big and small—for performers and viewers to co-create meaning, shaped by each viewer's individual experience. Both artists redefine the relationship between a show and its spectators—a relationship that is the beating heart of live performance, and the beating heart of free expression in a censored society.

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