

Keyword: Censorship

The 'Black Hand Army' of the Silver Screen and 'Work Honestly and You Will Have a Happy Life': Two Memories of Film Censorship

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Abstract

Even though many people who are engaged in it would not admit it, film censorship has always been a reality for Chinese film and filmmakers. Zhang Zanbo is an independent filmmaker who has encountered censorship restrictions on multiple occasions. He discusses the issue from his own experience, recalling two instances of film censorship when studying and working at the Beijing Film Academy. One occurred in a theatre and the other occurred while working on his final project. Although these memories are somewhat old and they seem to be private and trivial, they have some significance in revealing the reality of China today.

A few years ago, Mei Feng (梅峰), a professor at Beijing Film Academy, and his colleagues wrote a book about censorship in film around the world. The first name for it was *The Historical Evolution and Establishment of World Cinema Censorship* (世界电影审查的历史沿革与建制), then they changed it. Perhaps they were affected by the ideas of market-oriented publishing agencies. No matter how many times they changed the title and the cover they always went for a catchy and fashionable name. The final title was *Film Censorship: All the Things You Always Wanted to Know But Didn't Know Where to Ask* (电影审查: 你一直想知道却没处问的事儿). Mei Feng wrote the screenplays for *Summer Palace* 颐和园 (dir. Lou Ye 娄烨, 2006) and *Spring Fever* 春风沉醉的夜晚 (dir. Lou Ye, 2009). Both of these films were deemed 'politically incorrect' and were hammered by the iron fist of censorship, becoming banned films. The former film touched on the June Fourth incident; as a result, the Chinese government awarded Lou Ye with a five-year ban on filming. A book with such a tempting title is not only appealing for its surface meaning, but also because the reader thinks of the creative situation of the author, Mei Feng, and his colleague, director Lou Ye. The title sends a subtle message that suggests that the book must be some kind of insider story about Chinese film censorship from Mei's own perspective.

But when the reader opens the book, they discover that those assumptions are totally wrong. The

book is highly structured, and the content is nothing out of the ordinary. Each of the twelve chapters introduces film censorship in a particular country or region, with chapters devoted to the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain, South Korea, India, Thailand, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. The only country that is conspicuously absent is the People's Republic of China. This country has incredibly unique characteristics and has a strong censorship system, and yet it is missing from a book about censorship! Is the implication that China is not a part of this world, but exists in a different universe? It is impossible to be sure, but I'm curious to know if Mei Feng and the other authors wrote a chapter on China that was ultimately cut out by the editorial reviewers working at the publisher. Or perhaps they never intended to write that chapter at all? Did their knowledge of self-censorship, honed over a long period of work in the Chinese film industry, allow them to deliberately avoid this treacherous reef? No matter what happened, the whole thing sounded like a Soviet-era joke: a book written about censorship was itself subject to censorship or self-censorship, and the authors had no choice but to leave a big gap in the book. All of these things that the readers always wanted to know would remain unanswered. There was still nowhere to ask them.

Some people might associate film censorship with banned films, underground films, political taboos, ethical challenges, heavily censored film scripts, television shows and films that are pulled off the shelves, films that are withdrawn from competitions, independent film festivals that find their power has been cut, and independent directors that have been admonished and punished. Of course, this is part of the reality of the censorship system in China—in fact it is a large part of the system. No matter how many times this system is written about, recorded and explained to people, it will never be enough. I don't want to talk about that situation today. I wanted to describe two instances when I experienced censorship first-hand at my Beijing Film Academy, as an audience member and as a student. This does not have a direct causal relationship with me becoming a director of banned films; however, there is a broader sense of meaning that is associated with it.

About fifteen or sixteen years ago, a Finnish film festival was held while I was studying at Beijing Film Academy. It was probably an academic screening collaboratively organized by the Academy and the Finnish Embassy or the Finnish Cultural Centre or something like that. At that time, the Academy regularly held events of that nature. They screened art films and new releases in their theatre that is built to industry specifications and has a capacity of 800. Most of them were rare films on celluloid film. Sometimes members of the main creative team would come from halfway around the world to Beijing and hold a talk after the screening. Whenever that happened, it was an exciting day for film buffs like me. We sat down on the plush chairs of the theatre, looking forward to immersing ourselves in a new Finnish film called *Frozen Land* (dir. Aku Louhimies, 2005). But

then something strange happened that left us dumbfounded. A man and a woman began to make love, but the moment that the naked couple appeared intertwined on the bed, the screen went black. Surprisingly, the sounds of lovemaking could still be heard. This only happened for a brief moment; the picture quickly reappeared. At this point the scene had already changed to a different man who was wearing clothes—it was clear that he was peeping at the couple having sex. The camera moved back to the couple making love and the screen swiftly went black. It wasn't fully black though. An irregular shape seemed to be blocking the screen, and it allowed some of the image to come through at times. At this point, it finally dawned on the audience that the original film did not have a black screen during the lovemaking scenes, rather someone's hand was causing the image to be covered. No longer engrossed in the plot, we whipped our heads around to the booth and saw that someone was stretching out their hand to hastily cover the light emitted from the projector. Boos and whistles erupted as the crowd protested against the primitive and backward censorship tactics at play. But the mysterious member of the 'black hand army' was undeterred. He continued with his selective blackout method until the lovemaking scenes ended. It was an eye-opening day for me. I had seen films in that theatre for years, and I had watched plenty of art films with the sex scenes retained. This was the first time I had come across something like this. I was stunned that someone would use an improvisational method to cover up 'indecent' scenes during a screening. It was as if a grown-up had noticed that his own children were seeing things that they 'shouldn't see' or that 'weren't appropriate' so he quickly used his hands to cover their eyes. Who endowed this soldier of the 'black hand army' with a superior ethical awareness? (I later learned the answer: he was a mediocre department secretary who was in charge of running the film festival.) What made him so confident that he was the grown up and we were all the children in this situation?

This ridiculous experience is a symbol (and a plainly obvious one) that inadvertently illustrates the essential aspect of film censorship in a totalitarian state: the censors have a sense of moral and intellectual superiority over the people. Which is why he did not see anything wrong in deciding what content was appropriate for the general audience (or, for that matter, the manner through which that content was delivered). This uses the same psychological approach as was used for 'internal reference films' *neican dianying* (内参电影). Taboos and rules were applicable to ordinary people—they were not applicable to high-level officials or their relatives, who could ignore taboos and rules with impunity. This measure clearly has authoritarian elements—the mind and heart of one person was placed above the minds and hearts of many others. The power of one person eclipsed the rights of all others.

After the experience with the 'black hand army' I had my first experience of censorship of my own work. I was finishing the third year of my postgraduate degree in directing at the Beijing Film

Academy and was preparing to film the collaborative graduation project. This was a tradition that had been going on for a long time. Graduates, including directing students, would submit their own projects in their graduation year and apply to film a production that would be co-produced with the graduates from other departments. Then the university would select the best submissions and provide the winners with equipment and financial support for pre- and post-production. (It could be a short film or a feature film. They used to use film, but by the time I graduated everything was already digital.) The final products would be presented to the public and were regarded as the Academy's educational achievements of that year. All of the winning submissions would be screened in the theatre and a deluxe DVD set with gold lettering on the packaging would be produced by the Academy's audiovisual producer. The luckiest candidates would be invited to attend domestic and international film festivals, where they would come home with gold and silver awards.

I remember that I had written a realist story about a father and child who ran a photography studio in a small town, describing both their hardships and the apathy of others. At that time, I was interested in the lives of those from the lowest levels of society, and I even wrote a series of narrative poems about them during my postgraduate studies, but I did not have a clear, self-conscious political and cultural critical thinking ability as I do today. More than anything else, I was a sentimental artistic youth that wanted to express my strong emotions. I handed my script of roughly sixty scenes to my supervisor. Not only was he a senior professor in the directing department, but he was a member of the Fourth Generation of directors and one of the most experienced judges on the panel for the collaborative graduation project. (The judging panel included the president of the college, the secretary of the party committee, and the heads of various departments—their names had to appear at the beginning or end of all collaborative graduation projects.) It is worth mentioning that this teacher just so happened to work part time on the film censorship committee for the China Film Administration, so he was a bona fide censor. This was something that all of the teachers and students in the department knew about, because this teacher did not hide the fact that he worked there. In fact, he was candid and even seemed to be proud of it, because along with being a director and a professor, being a censor endowed him with additional authority.

At that time I didn't perceive the fact that he censored films part time to be important. I thought that it had nothing to do with me. I was an artistic youth born in a town hundreds of miles from Beijing and when I achieved my dream of getting into film school and became a film youth living in the capital, I had visions of making a film of my own (a drama, not a documentary, mind you). Back then I had no grasp of the censorship system. I was so thrilled to be getting into the Academy that I subconsciously chose not to ponder the elephant in the room, which of course I had to face sooner or later. That was why I knew nothing about the process or method of his censorship work then. I didn't know how the committee was established, who his colleagues were, whether they were paid or not, how

often they censored things, where they censored things, how many committee members participate at a time, what the review criteria were, how films were scored, or anything like that. I knew practically nothing. I remembered that sometimes when he taught a class after reviewing a film, he would tell us about some of the scenes or the details with great enthusiasm. He might tell us how he gave a ‘rotten film’ a low score, or that he conducted the censorship work in the China Central Television (CCTV)-6 Movie Channel building next to the Academy, things like that. But his experiences were purely bits and pieces of information, like a hazy mass of clouds and fog—it didn’t tell us the way things really were. I wasn’t the least bit interested in those things back then. Several years later, I am chagrined every time I think of this. If I knew then what I know now, I would have continued to ask questions until I got to the heart of the matter. Perhaps I would have been able to learn some valuable tricks about dealing with totalitarian censorship. At that time, the film censorship committee had a good reputation, but it did not release a members list to the public. They were like mysterious people hiding behind a mask of nationalism, that everyone knew about but had never seen. To think that I knew one personally and was taught by him, what an honour! It would still be a few years before anyone could go online and find a list of names of the film censorship committee members. Perhaps there had been a welcome trend to promote ‘open government’ or perhaps some well-intentioned individual decided to disclose the names. Either way, when I saw the name of my teacher on that list in black and white, next to the names of twenty or more authorities in the film world, I had mixed feelings.

The only times when I felt that film censorship had an impact on my life was when I was supposed to have class with this teacher, and a class representative or another teacher in the department would tell us that class was cancelled. Either we would go to a different class, or we had self-study, or we could do whatever we wanted. The reason class was cancelled was because he went to censor a film. It was plainly obvious that when it came to these two roles, his censorship work was more important and more urgent than his teaching. There was another detail about this teacher that upset me somewhat: when I first arrived at the directing department, I inadvertently discovered a rather interesting discrepancy between the identities of my two supervisors. One was my actual supervisor, Zhang Ming, whose debut work *Rainclouds over Wushan* 巫山云雨 (dir. Zhang Ming 章明, 1996) was banned multiple times. The film was selected for the Tokyo International Film Festival three years in a row, and the China Film Administration refused to allow it to be screened, arguing that the film was ‘of poor artistic quality, of an obscure style, and too grim in tone’. Later, he aspired to make the best suspense thriller China had ever seen and wrote a script called *17 Hours 57 Minutes 38 Seconds* (17小时57分38秒). But he was stymied by the censors yet again. The China Film Administration said it was ‘too terrifying and reprised elements of the Cultural Revolution’ and therefore did not allow filming. Forced to make hasty changes to the script, he ended up with a very different film—a

romantic psychological drama that was neither scary nor set in the Cultural Revolution. Even the title changed to *Weekend Plot* 秘语十七小时 (dir. Zhang Ming, 2002). When it was released, it was met with a lukewarm reception. My other supervisor was this part-time censor. Even though I wasn't technically one of his students, in reality he and Zhang Ming were both my supervisors. Usually he and Zhang Ming would take turns teaching classes for the graduate students in the department and guiding our film assignments. There is no evidence to prove it was my censor-teacher's work that led directly to Zhang Ming's unfortunate encounter with the censors. Still, the fact that a part-time censor and a director who had been censored worked in the same department, both acting as my supervisors, teaching the same students, and sharing the same curriculum, couldn't have been a magical stroke of serendipity. Not when you really think about it. Of course, words like magical and serendipity are hardly appropriate to describe someone's fate, but that person doesn't have the luxury to decide what words should be used.

When he had read my script, my part-time censor/part-time teacher smiled and said:

This script of yours is well written, in fact it's probably one of the best amongst your classmates, but it certainly won't pass. The tone is too grim.

Upon hearing his prediction, I felt that the words were vaguely familiar. Then it clicked—they said the same thing about Zhang Ming's work, that it was too grim! Zhang Ming couldn't possibly have been the first director to have been treated that way. Zhang Yuan (张元), Wang Xiaoshuai (王小帅), Lou Ye, Jia Zhangke (贾樟柯) and other Sixth Generation filmmakers who started out as 'underground directors' all seem to have received similar reviews. It was much later that the censors got wise and found a more neutral and convincing, but in fact more ambiguous and uninformed pretext – 'technical problems' – to replace the original clichés that could easily expose their aesthetic and intellectual shortcomings. So, the emperor wasn't wearing any clothes, but that didn't mean that they couldn't continue to fashion terrible outfits for him. All the while, they would call the outfits gorgeous and grand.

My teacher explained:

You know what? According to the main melody film template, the kind of story you have written can only end in one way: work honestly and you will have a happy life. But your story gets it backwards, because they work hard but they don't have a happy life. That won't work at all.

Just like that, my graduation film that had not yet reached infancy, ended up on the cutting room

floor, thanks to the elephant in the room.

‘Work honestly and you will have a happy life.’ My teacher enunciated each word carefully in his rich, clear voice, so much so that when I think of the moment all these years later, it still sounds like yesterday, and the words still ring in my ears. Besides the overt meaning imparted by this sentence, there were also two other layers of meaning: ‘work dishonestly to have a happy life’ and ‘working honestly to have an unhappy life’ were not allowed. They were unlawful ways of living. It was an unquestionable truth like a strict mathematical formula: honesty + labour = happy life. In the same way that $1+1=2$ meant that $1+1=1$, $1+1=3$, $1+1=4$ and all the other possibilities were wrong.

It seemed that censorship was not only a set of political views and ethics, but an entire worldview. Not only was it sensitive to ideology and ethical standards, it had something to say about everything in life. It was like an overbearing life designer for everyone in the world, dictating their path in life. It was like a judge of a diving competition only allowing a simple straight dive off the platform. Even the splash made by the athlete had to be a specific size and shape. Any deviation from the established path, no matter how slight, would be a departure from the norm and would have to be corrected and punished.

This absurd method not only infringes on people’s freedom and rights, but also deprives people of the possibilities and richness of life. Eventually the vast and vibrant ocean of art will become a pool of trite, stagnant water. It’s not like they haven’t done something like this before—think of the eight revolutionary operas.

When I think back on these events, I don’t want to and shouldn’t be too hard on my teacher. In that moment his suggestions were not simply personal advice, because he also represented the other people in the review panel. The long list of names that appeared in the opening and closing credits of the collaborative graduation project ended up being the first ‘film censorship board’ I had ever encountered. The people on that list did not simply represent themselves, but the predictable and obstinate system that stood behind them. In this way, they were moralists, and they were also conservative at the deepest level. They censored assiduously, not only to show their determination to defend the established order, but also to maintain the legitimacy of their own power. They only ever had to think about the power entrusted to them—they never had to consider the feelings and situation of the person under scrutiny. Ironically, a true committee, as the name implies, must receive a mandate from the public, and not the other way around—to gain rights and power by swearing allegiance to the One in the dark box. Of course, if they realized this level of logic, they wouldn’t be who they were. The system of censorship would fall apart. In this land, censorship and totalitarianism

accompany each other. If the skin cannot survive, what will the hair attach itself to?

While the system is still strong in China, the censors are not only official members of a committee and are not necessarily wielding the scissors of power, cutting your film script into tatters. They might not limit themselves to the field of film, either. In reality, they are everywhere, just like the Monkey King who is able to pluck his hair and duplicate himself. If they like, they can rapidly clone copies of themselves with uncannily similar faces and DNA. Then they can take over everything: the real world, the spiritual world, the film industry, the publishing industry, online discussions, and everyday speech.

Of course, feelings about censorship vary from person to person, as people are likely to have extremely different values. Some people consider the dragon seal to be disgraceful and offensive; others consider it to be an honour or an achievement. When I was still on Weibo, before my account was blocked, I would see directors, including so-called independent directors, excitedly flashing their projecting license or their filming license. Every time they did that, plenty of people would like it or congratulate the director. And that wasn't even the funniest part. Recently, an experienced, former independent documentary filmmaker made a new film that was granted a dragon seal. When the film was screened at a youth art film festival in China, the audience clapped and cheered while the gold dragon seal glittered on the screen (note, the dragon seal is always the first image in a publicly-screened film and is the icon representing the spirit and power of censorship). The director, for his part, posted on social media saying that was a monumental moment in his life. I agree that everyone has the freedom to make personal choices in everything, but when I think of the totalitarian system that the golden dragon represents and what it has done to independent film and Chinese film in general, I can't help but feel sad. As an example, I watched a veteran documentary filmmaker being openly questioned by mainland filmmakers at a post-screening discussion of one of his films at a film festival in Taiwan. They asked why he was exhibiting a film without a dragon seal and showing the dark side of his homeland to outsiders. Over a decade ago, students in the Academy theatre could still boo the spiritual censor, while just over a decade later, young audiences at art film festivals clap and cheer when they are greeted with a totalitarian icon, one that represents the true act of censorship and achieves the surrender of any shred of independent spirit by means of coercion. This is nothing less than the fall of the world; that's all there is to it.