Left Behind Children and Chinese Contemporary Art

Chengmei (Tami) Xiang

This thesis is presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts
at
The University of Western Australia
School of Design
2018
Thesis Declaration

I, Chengmei Xiang (Tami), certify that:

This thesis has been substantially accomplished during enrolment in the degree.

This thesis does not contain material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name, in any university or other tertiary institution.

No part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name, for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of The University of Western Australia and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint-award of this degree.

This thesis does not contain any material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

The work(s) are not in any way a violation or infringement of any copyright, trademark, patent, or other rights whatsoever of any person.

The research involving human data reported in this thesis was assessed and approved by The University of Western Australia Human Research Ethics Committee. Approval #: RA/4/20/1022

This thesis does not contain work that I have published, nor work under review for publication.

Signature: [signature]

Date: 5th October 2018
Table of Contents

Left Behind Children and Chinese Contemporary Art .............................. 1
Thesis Declaration .............................................................................. 2
Table of Contents ............................................................................... 3
Abstract .............................................................................................. 4
Acknowledgements ............................................................................. 5
Introduction: A censored socially engaged art exhibition, Spokesman Plan
............................................................................................................. 9
Chapter One: A Brief History of Chinese Contemporary Art .................... 11
Chapter Two: Censorship in China and Chinese socially engaged art ........ 15
  2.1 Background of Censorship and my Previous Work that has been Censored 15
  2.2 Protest and Activism are Heavily Forbidden ...................................... 19
  2.3 Artists’ Works that Have been Censored ............................................ 21
  2.4 Artists’ Works that Have been Escaped from the Censorship ............. 33
Chapter Three: Left Behind Children (LBC) in China .............................. 41
The Background of Left Behind Children ............................................. 43
The creative component of Left Behind Children .................................. 48
References .......................................................................................... 55
Appendix 1: Ethic Approval .................................................................... 66
Appendix 2: Co-authored Article with Dr. Darren Jorgensen .................... 66
Abstract

This research project uses the unique voice of contemporary socially engaged Chinese art through a specific case study of the Left Behind Children (LBC). The 61 million LBC grow up with their grandparents or great grandparents in the countryside while their parents work in the cities, sometimes thousands of kilometers away. The project includes this thesis and an exhibition. To contextualise this project, this thesis explores the conditions of censorship imposed on contemporary art in China by analysing the artworks of Guo Jian, Wang Yongsheng, and Guo Xiaojun. It also analyses the strategies used by artists Wang Qingsong and Ai Song to successfully escape strict censorship to deliver their attitude and voices through allegory. The purpose of this research project is to arouse awareness and give voices to the LBC through contemporary art, and under the conditions of severe censorship within China.
Acknowledgements

This research was supported by an Australian Government Research Training Program (RTP) Scholarship’.

This project is the outcome of numerous people’s support and inspiration. There are too many to name here, but I wish to acknowledge a significant few.

First and foremost, I have deep gratitude to my two supervisors Dr. Darren Jorgensen and Dr. Ionat Zurr for their unwavering support and the constructively critical thoughts of their knowledge related to theoretical writing and the visual component. This thesis would not have been possible without the proper guidance, critical comments, help and support from my professional supervisors. As a non-native English speaker, I am so appreciated that my two supervisors for their patience for encouraging me with writing and editing, and encouraging me to write articles for publication, as well as giving suggestions for my exhibition. It is impossible to get both writing and exhibition together without their professional support and help.

I would like to acknowledge Dr Krystyna Haq and Dr. Michael Azariadis from the Graduate Research School for helping me with editing, especially at the early stage of this research.

I’m so appreciative for the constant suggestions and encouragement from art critic Dr. Hao Qingsong from Tsing Hua University. With his professional knowledge and sparkling inspiration, he wrote the essay "404 artist Tami Xiang and Left Behind Children" (Hao 2018). I would also like to acknowledge Dr. Peter Pfrunder from the Swiss Foundation for Photography, who gave me support and suggestions from the beginning of the project to its completion with his professional knowledge. I would also like to show my appreciation to Chinese art critic Gu Kaijun for his critical article titled "Tami Xiang: the Social
Spectacle and Body Redemption in ‘Peasantography’” (Gu 2018) on this Left Behind Children project.

I am also grateful to other staff and colleagues from School of Design, especially Jane Bisschops for her administrative help for all my settling down at UWA, and Sarah Douglas for her encouragement and suggestions for exhibitions and promotion. I am so appreciative to everyone in the postgraduate study area, particularly Ainslie Gatt, Anne Shelly and Elliod Lind who helped with the installation for the exhibition.

I am extremely indebted to all the participants of this study, the children who accepted and took part in the fieldwork as well as their parents, caregivers and teachers for their kind support and cooperation during my fieldwork. I owe most to the exchanges with my main participants, all the LBC and families who accepted me to photograph and video them. For their kindness and generosity, I am forever thankful.

Last but most important, I wish to take this opportunity to extend my heartfelt thanks to Daniel Wilkinson, Glynis Wilkinson, Geoff Wilkinson and Jasmine Wilkinson for their unconditional financial and spiritual support in the past few years, especially to Daniel for always taking care of me, believing in me, encouraging me and supporting me. To them I dedicate this thesis.

Chengmei (Tami) Xiang

18th September 2018, Perth
## AUTHORSHIP DECLARATION: CO-AUTHORED PUBLICATION

This thesis contains work that has been published.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Details of the work:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location in thesis:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P22-P32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student contribution to work:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student has co-authored 50% of this essay.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Co-author signatures and dates:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Darren Jorgensen:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tami Xiang:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24 October, 2018</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student signature:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Date: 24 October, 2018</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I, Darren Jorgensen certify that the student statements regarding their contribution to each of the works listed above are correct.

Coordinating supervisor signatures: [Signature]

Date: 24 October, 2018
Introduction: A censored socially engaged art exhibition, *Spokesman*

Plan

On the third of July 2018, an exhibition called *Spokesman Plan (Dai Yan Ji Hua)* by artist NutBrother in JiaFeng Space in 798 art district BeiJing was forcibly shut down by the Beijing Industrial and Commercial Bureau (NutBrother 2018). The exhibition showed nine thousand bottles of polluted drinking water from XiaoHaotu county in ShanXi province. The drinking water for more than ten thousand villagers has been heavily polluted by three coal companies’ waste in Xiao Haotu. This has been a problem for more than ten years, being a major cause for cancer development many people, cancer that is caused by heavy metals such as Manganese (LanShanLieQi 2018; Yang 2018). Reports from the villagers have been ignored. NutBrother bought nine thousand bottles of the famous Chinese spring water NongFuShanQuan (Spring water of Farmers) and put the polluted water in the bottles after emptying the unpolluted ones. He exhibited the nine thousand bottles at a supermarket in JiaFeng space in 798 art district in Beijing, so that anyone who wants to express concern and raise the profile of the issue of polluted water can purchase one from the supermarket for one RMB a bottle, as well as online (Olivia and Zoe 2018). This aroused a lot of attention from social media which consequently made the government nervous. The exhibition was shut down half way through (the exhibition was supposed to be on for a month), and eighty-seven boxes of water bottles were transported away from the supermarket by the Industrial and Commercial Bureau (RenRen 2018).

In May 2018, NutBrothers organized a band in XiaoHaotu for a concert titled *Drinking Heavy Metal Water, Listening to Heavy Metal Music*. The band planned to play to two hundred lambs instead of people to avoid regulations around illegal gatherings. However, on the day the local government did not allow the volunteers to participate, a power supply was not allowed for the band, the lambs were not allowed to be borrowed, and in the end the group had a silent concert facing the open fields (Wang, D. 2018). “It’s just like the voice of the villagers cannot be heard, no matter how hard you are screaming,” NutBrother describes (NutBrother 2018).
However, the group of people was monitored for twenty-four hours by the local police until they went to the airport (Olivia and Zoe 2018).

Despite the policing of NutBrother's works, he attracted much attention on social media, and this may have directly influenced the government to take actions to deal with the water pollution. According to the reports on the official WeiBo site of YuYang District propaganda department, twenty-two thousand water filter machines have since been installed, and pipes have been installed to supply clean water. Thirdly, the three coal companies have been forced to stop production until all the waste is properly stored (YuYang 2018).

Nutbrother’s *Spokesman Plan* is a typical piece of socially engaged art that deals with social issues. The success of this kind of art lies in the way that it arouses public attention and further gives a voice to social issues. Such works inspire my practice, and my research on socially engaged art. In this exhibition and thesis I have researched the issue of the Left Behind Children (LBC) in China. I want to give a voice to the sixty-three million Children in China from rural areas who have been left behind by their parents who have migrated to work in Chinese cities. As the renowned Chinese art critic Li Xianting argues in his book *The Importance of Art is not Art itself* (2000, 406-428), the importance of art lies in the message that it conveys. Chinese art critic Wang Nanming also argues in his book *After Concept: Art and Criticism* (2006) that art offers a way for citizens to be engaged in social issues, whether it changes society or not (Wang 2006). The famous Chinese social scientist Li Yinhen agreed at the 2011 *Xiang Xi Inspection* art exhibition that art can convey a direct and shocking visual message to audiences that it is hard for social science to deliver (Wang 2017).

The multiple narration and interpretation of art is a means of delivering attitude and message in a relatively safer way. In this research, I want to explore how socially engaged art that deals with social issues to convey a message in the Chinese political and social context that is subjected to severe censorship.
Chapter One: A Brief History of Chinese Contemporary Art

In this chapter, I will discuss the history of Chinese contemporary art and introduce some Chinese contemporary artists whose works address Chinese social issues such as human rights, freedom, individual awareness and education. The work of these artists has helped me personally to interpret these social issues. Their works also provide strong evidence that Chinese contemporary art can give a voice to social issues. In this chapter I will explore, through contemporary artworks the techniques, ways and strategies, that Chinese artists use in their aspiration to raise and discuss social issues.

China is a communist country led by the Government of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). It was established in 1949. All decisions of national significance are made by the National People’s Congress (led by the Chinese Communist Party) and take into account socialist principles and the strengthening of the power of the state. The legal power of the Government of the PRC is absolute as it controls all aspects of the state, policy decisions, the economy, culture, the military and the media (Wang, H. 2014; Li, C. 2012; He 2012).

According to Paul Gladstone’s *Contemporary Chinese Art, a Critical History* (2014), since the founding of PRC until the present, all art, publicly exhibited in the PRC, has been required to conform to the political circumstances, implicitly or explicitly, of the ruling of Chinese Communist Part (CCP) (Gladston 2014, 29). In her Ph.D thesis, *Account of Development of Performance Art in China from 1979-2010* (2012), Pui Tong states that the main function of art in China has largely been to praise and support the government and the political party to build a new image for China since its founding (Tong 2015, 39). This means that artistic practice has to be able to service ‘revolutionary’ social responsibilities. Visual art has played a very important role in the communist political propaganda and cultural practice since 1949, particularly in Mao’s era (Gladston 2014, 9; Hung 2000). Art was particularly employed as a political propaganda tool until the 1980s. For example, the most successful artist in this era was Li Keran, who painted *Representation of BeiHai Park and Wan Shan Hong Bian* (万山红遍) during the years 1962 to 1964. In these
paintings, he depicted the beautiful homeland of PRC and praised the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party. This was the time China was experimenting with the Great Leap Forward movement (1958-1961) that led to massive starvation and took away a conservatively estimated 20 million to 30 million lives (Chang and Chung 2001; Harvey 2013; Dikötter 2010, 7). Through art the new ideology and socialist goals could be effectively conveyed to the population at large, while also motivating artists and intellectuals to further engage in the making of ideological propaganda (Yan 2014).

There is not a clearly united scholarly agreement as to when Chinese contemporary art started, however the 1980s are regarded as its first decade. The term ‘Chinese contemporary art’ is widely used to denote various forms of avant-garde, experimental and museum based art produced as part of the liberalization of culture since the 1978 policy of ‘Opening and Reform’ (改革开放), which was advocated by Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s. It was he who instructed China to take upon itself the ideology of 'Socialism with Chinese characteristics' (中国特色社会主义). This means that China followed the capitalist market economy, but also followed the communist ideology led by the CCP. Information is still strictly controlled and an education system dominated by communist ideology is still applied to condition people’s ways of thinking. As the capitalist market economy gained rapid growth in China, Chinese people came to witness other people’s basic rights such as freedom of speech, human rights and freedom of publication. This conflict has resulted in policies of censorship being adopted by the Chinese government. China has some of the strictest censorship in the world in relation to visual art, poetry, movies, books, journalism, bloggers and cyber-dissidents. The transgression of censorship decrees may result in heavy punishment by the government, even jail sentences such as experienced by the famous dissident Nobel Laureate Liu Xiaobo who had, before his death in 2017, been in jail for eleven years (Watts 2009, 1).

Much Chinese contemporary art emerged from artists’ dissatisfaction with the status quo. Under the influence of Western thought and artistic “language”, the early Chinese contemporary artists used artistic expression to challenge government
ideology (Gladston 2014, 31) and instead to express Western ideological values such as democracy, freedom, equality, human rights and freedom of speech (Hung 2010, 5). A core value of this contemporary art is the freedom of expression, a value which conflicts with the policies and constitution of the PRC (Chiu and Benjamin 2011, 272). It is this political context that provides the background for socially engaged Chinese contemporary art.

Chinese contemporary art has been closely related to the development of Chinese society. Chinese contemporary art in this era mainly addresses politics, social issues, history and culture, as well as assists social change through being anti-traditional and anti-aesthetic, as well as being influenced by Western ideas of individualization (Lee 2013, 456). Many artists groups were established between 1979-1989, such as The Stars group in Beijing (1979), The Pond group, previously called the Hangzhou Youth Creativity Society (1986-1989), and Xiamen Dada in Xiamen (1985). The Stars group is best known as a radical group of artists led by artist Huang Rui and Ma Desheng, who held an unsanctioned exhibition in a park outside the National Art Gallery in Beijing in 1979, which was closed by the police three days later (Hung 2010, 11). This event led to a protest by the artists at the Democracy Wall in Beijing. The protest later moved to the office of the Beijing Municipal Party Committee with a slogan “We mean democracy and artistic freedom” (Tong 2015, 41).

Author and curator Melissa Chiu argues that the proliferation of artistic activity during the 1980s in Hebei, Hunan, Chengdu, Wuhan, Guangzhou, Lanzhou, and Nanjing had three characteristics: a metaphysical tendency, a focus on spirituality and an interest in anti-art (Chiu 2008). The New Wave movement (started in 1985) lasted two years and was considered the first Chinese avant-garde art movement across the country. It included about seventy-nine self-organized art groups and more than two thousand artist held conferences and exhibitions. At this time, some Western art and Western modern philosophical and literary works by those such as Jacques Derrida, Jaques Lacan, Martin Heidegger, Franz Kafka, and Friedrich Nietzsche were being translated into Chinese, which aroused enthusiastic discussion among these artists. These were new since most artists had never travelled overseas
before, and had limited command of European languages. This import of Western modern thought and philosophy has significantly influenced and inspired Chinese artists and their art creation (Hung 2010, 5). The movement developed a more provocative direction and ended with a peak exhibition, the China Avant-Garde exhibition at the National Gallery in 1989. At this exhibition, Xiao Lu shot her staged installation Dialogue (对话) with a gun, which resulted in the exhibition being closed by the Chinese officials. Xiao Lu and TangSong, collaborators on the work, were arrested and later Xiao Lu immigrated to Sydney. Outside the gallery was a banner written “No U-turn” which represented a resistance to Chinese tradition. This exhibition is considered a significant milestone in Chinese contemporary art history.
Chapter Two: Censorship in China and Chinese socially engaged art

In this section, I will discuss some political policies in China led by the CCP that have influenced the expression of Chinese people. I will also discuss some artist’s works which have been censored by the Chinese authorities. The tension between the pursuit of political freedom and the iron-grip control of the centralized government provide the backdrop for the production of Chinese contemporary art especially socially engaged art. Chinese contemporary artists’ demands for freedom of expression and the censorship imposed by the Chinese government creates conflict and is also the background for Chinese contemporary art.

2.1 Background of censorship and my previous work that has been censored

It is important to understand the history of political repression in China and why Chinese intellectuals today are reluctant to publicly express their convictions in any forms including the ones through art. It is also important to understand why so many Chinese intellectuals are prepared to present themselves as spokespeople for the Communist Party. To appreciate these issues we must understand the historical background to the ‘mind control movement’ in the PRC. Chinese intellectuals’ freedom of expression has been profoundly influenced by three major political events since the establishment of the PRC. These were the Anti-Rightist Movement (1957-1958), the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), and the Tiananmen Square Massacre (1989), which influenced generations of Chinese artists and led, in many ways, to a crisis in cultural identity.

Importantly, each of these political movements and events have curtailed freedom of speech. Public discussion and criticism on these movements is still not allowed in China. For example, the Tiananmen Square Massacre (1989) is still very sensitive to the government and is still highly censored in China (Ng 2014, 11). News, photos and videos of the Tiananmen Square Massacre are still blocked in the PRC, including the names of the leading student protesters such as Chai Ling, Wang Dan and Wu'er Kaixi who fled abroad and were banned from returning to China again.
The Chinese authorities are in essence attempting to erase the Tiananmen Square Massacre from the collective memory of Chinese people. No memorial activities are allowed in mainland China (Kuang 2016). International social media such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube and others are blocked in China, and information appearing on the websites relating to the Massacre is censored. The number 89 (which refers to the year 1989, the year of the Tiananmen massacre) and 64 (which refers to the fourth of June, the day of the Tiananmen massacre), as well as the Chinese characters for these words have become sensitive words in China (Kaiman 2013). Today, the younger generation born after the 1990s never hear about the Tiananmen Square Massacre because of this censorship, but those people who have experienced or heard about the massacre still remember it. Around the fourth of June every year, the atmosphere becomes extremely intense and the Chinese authorities try to prevent any potential memorial events relating to the Tiananmen Square Massacre occurring anywhere in China (Kyodo 2018). Some dissenting figures are sent away from Beijing to secret places around the fourth of June to stop them organizing any activities.

Even today, security control of Tiananmen Square remains very strict (Reuters 2014). Tiananmen Square is guarded by police and plainclothes police take police patrol duty to arrest potential protestors quickly and to remove them in a van without many people noticing (Zhao and Zhao 2001, Kyodo 2018, 3). The Square has two entrance gates with X-ray scanning machines to check visitors and their bags. In December 2016, it took me more than 40 minutes queuing to pass through the checkpoint, which I videoed. After the 40 minutes, I finally got into Tiananmen Square to perform my work. At the beginning, I was just going to take a photo of myself at Tiananmen Square with a safety mask on my face (Figure 1). The mask was painted with a big red circle with an exclamation mark in the middle. This is the censorship symbol appearing on the social media Wechat, that the Online Safety Management Bureau uses when it closes websites on the internet, and it looked very bright and powerful on my mouth. My friend took a few photos of me wearing the mask and I noticed many plainclothes police looking at us. Then minutes later
everyone was chased away from Tiananmen Square without any explanations; we
obeyed and left.

This work also draws upon my father’s life. Before he passed away my father was a
practitioner of exorcism. He was well known and highly respected in our area. When
I was a child I saw him use chicken blood or the blood from a cut on his middle finger
in his exorcisms. I was also told that a woman’s menstrual blood would have even
stronger power to chase away spirits. Away from my family, in the course of my
formal education, I became sceptical of my father’s exorcism practices. But in later
life I became more accepting and in the context of my art I chose to use menstrual
blood to chase away the ‘smog ghosts’, as well as those metaphorical ghosts that
stand in the way of freedom for citizens of the PRC, and in particular women’s
freedom.

In my artwork “Tami Xiang Safety Mask” (Figure 1) the application of menstrual
blood to the masks to protest against government censorship was symbolic. The
mouth has the ability to speak but is silenced; the blood carries no potential for
speech in a conventional sense, but has become a medium for the expression of
resistance. The shape of the masks cut from canvas resemble period pads, forming
an inter-textual relationship between the masks and the pads. The extremely private
period pads are brought into public to question air pollution, and censorship issues
and political inaction from the Chinese government.
The 35th article of the PRC Constitution states that, “Citizens of the People’s Republic of China enjoy freedom of speech, of the press, of assembly, of association, of procession and of demonstration” (Congress 1982). However, in reality, freedom of speech, assembly and protest is very limited in the PRC. Chinese President Xi Jinping came to power in 2012, and since 2016 has been a so-called ‘core leader’ of the ruling party, potentially putting him on a par with former paramount leaders Mao and Deng, whose authority must never be challenged. Xi has taken a hardline approach to dissent since coming to power in 2012, declaring that Chinese artists should work to promote socialism, demonstrating an attitude towards the arts that mirrors Mao’s from 40 years ago (Jing 2018, 8). Xi said that art should:

   Embody socialist core values in a lively and vivid way, uphold Chinese spirit and rally Chinese strength. Fine art works should be like sunshine from blue sky and breeze in spring that will inspire minds, warm hearts, cultivate taste and clean up undesirable work styles (Henri 2015, 7).

As the Chinese authority has cracked down on dissenting arts, artists have adopted tactics to find a voice or express an attitude. Too direct expressions of dissent on social issues could put the artist in jail.
Chinese contemporary art has become an important part of a national branding image for China’s self-promotion, however, due to the critical quality of contemporary art, the Chinese government still tries to constrain its content. Chinese artists face a situation in which they want to express their attitudes and ideas, but do not want to be censored or jailed. This has meant that Chinese artists have come to use these social-political conditions as motifs in their works. They have harnessed China’s aesthetic tradition and the nation’s rich history, focusing their rebellious spirit toward domestic socio-political issues and problems through art expression. The government, on the other hand, has attempted to exert control over the artist so that their creative work would serve the interests of the state. Yet contemporary art is a form of free self-expression, executed to question social issues and arouse thinking. How can contemporary art especially socially engaged art in China maintain its potential to resist the Chinese states’ monopoly over power in the face of overt regulation and censorship? These are the questions and situation that confront Chinese contemporary artists. In the following, I outline a few engagements that Chinese artists have had with the authorities, in order to picture something of the conditions under which artists work. However, it is also important to note that academics and journalists also work under such conditions. While official media such as the People’s Daily and Global Times mostly play the role of propaganda, newspapers such as Southern Weekend are more likely to do in-depth investigation and to report social issues. Even then, events might not appear at all in mass media, and instead appear only on social media.

2.2 Protest and activism are heavily forbidden
To take one recent example, a protest organized by thirty million long-distance truck drivers in June 2018 ended with silence. In order to protest low fees, rising fuel costs, and insecure contracts, the truck drivers staged a nationwide strike (Mimi and He 2018). The strike was organized via social media such as Wechat and Weibo with an anonymous statement which called the drivers to strike to begin the 10th of June. Protests and strikes were on the eastern provinces of Shandong, Anhui, Jiangxi, and Zhejiang, and in southwestern Sichuan, Guizhou, and Chongqing, as well as in the central provinces of Hubei and Henan and in Shanghai. Videos of the protest were
circulated on social media, but the authorities quickly deleted posts relating to the protest (Te-Ping 2018; Mimi 2018).

A second recent example is the incarceration of Dong Yaoqiong, who splashed ink on a Xi Jinping poster in Shanghai (Figure2). She has been forced into a psychiatric hospital in her hometown Zhuzhou in Hu Nan province by the Chinese authorities (Lai 2018). Dong live-streamed her activist protest on Twitter when she was pouring black ink on a billboard advertisement featuring Xi Jinping by accusing the authorities of 'brain-control' and calling Xi Jinping as dictator. Twitter is blocked in China, but people inside China who have censor evading Virtual Private Network software can access it, along with other blocked sites. Dong’s father subsequently appeared in YouTube live streams broadcast by artist Hua Yong and claimed that his daughter has never had mental illness (Alexandra 2018; Press 2018, 9). Dong’s act comes at a particularly sensitive time as the government aggressively nurtures a cult of personality, especially after the 19th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party which removed the limitation of Xi’s term in March 2018.

Figure 2. Dong Yaoqiong, livestreaming herself defacing a poster of Xi Jinping in Shanghai. 2018. Source: screenshot image from online.

The Central Propaganda Department of China has warned its more than 60 million online users not to engage in any 'illegal' online behaviour including 'inappropriate comments'. Criticism of the government or the party even on the social media can
be dangerous. According to online writer Jiang Jun, "You can't try to dig up the truth about party history or say anything bad about the party" (Gao, Wan, and Wen 2017).

2.3 Artists’ Works that Have been Censored

Artists, too, are at risk. In 2015, Shanghai-based photographic artist Dai Jianyong, was accused of 'creating a disturbance' and detained for a month after he circulated a photographic work of the artist’s screwed face photoshopped onto President Xi Jinping’s portrait with a Hitler style moustache (Henri 2015, 2; Jack 2015) (Figure 3). The title of his work is *Chrysanthemum Face*, which means the anus in Chinese slang. Faces up to 5 years in prison if he is convicted. After he was detained, Dai’s art circle organized an appeal on social media in which the participants pulled the 'chrysanthemum face' and posted them on social media with an online exhibition on Wechat and Weibo.

![Figure 3. Dai Jianyong, Chrysanthemum Face. 2015, Photography. Source: artist Dai Jianyong (@coca96) via Instagram](image)

A more recent example of an artist in trouble with the authorities is that of Guo Jian. An Australian-Chinese artist, Guo was born in the 1962 in Guizhou province. He arrived in Australia in 1992 after witnessing the massacre in Tiananmen Square.
Before becoming a student and taking part in the Tiananmen hunger strike and protest, Guo was a soldier in the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). The impression in his mind was that the soldier’s duty was to protect the people of the whole nation, however, after the massacre he started to question that why PLA’s soldiers could open fire on their own people (Xiang 2018).

Figure 4. Guo Jian, The Square. 2014, pork mince, mixed media. Source: artist.

Guo became a sensitive public dissident for his artwork The Square in 2014 (Figure 4), which crossed the red line of Chinese government censorship and as a result he was deported back to Australia by the Chinese authorities (ABC 2014; Tan 2014). Tiananmen was created in his studio in Beijing a few days before the fourth of June, the 25th anniversary of the massacre. He collected the ruins from the site of a dismantled building and built these ruins into a scene of Tiananmen with the iconic buildings such as the Great Hall of the People, the Forbidden City and Tiananmen Square itself. The staged scene looked like it had just been bombed, like a battle ground full of dust smoke. Then Guo placed 160 kilograms of fresh pork mince on top of the ruin site, which made the whole scene appear bloody (Om 2014). The mince-built Tiananmen reminds viewers of the Tiananmen event of 1989, also known as the Tiananmen Massacre. Guo was interviewed by the Financial Times and the work was published. Soon after the Chinese authorities found Guo in his studio.
and sent him to detention for 15 days before the Australia embassy got him out. Guo explained to the police that he was inspired by the building dismantling everywhere around Beijing, including sites of historical significance. Was Tiananmen Square next to be demolished (Barlow 2014)? However, the Chinese police regarded it as a horror and threat to Chinese authority. Guo’s work and even his name in now censored in China. He is unable to go back to China for 5 years.

My own work has also been subject to censorship and a part of censored exhibitions. I was recently included in a contemporary show titled Wild Field (野场) alongside 51 other artists. It opened in Niu Art Space in ShiJiaZhuang on the 27th of May. The exhibition also included work by artists who participated in the events of Tiananmen Square in 1989, including Yan Zhengxue, Wang Peng, and the Gao Brothers. These artists have continued to be considered symbols of liberalization, democracy and subversion and as such pose a threat to the ruling CCP. Produced by Liu Heyin, Wild Field was a high end exhibition that the Chinese art media recognised as the first to systematically present art responding to issues concerning the countryside in the last hundred years (Art 2018). The exhibition presented different types of art media including performance art, conceptual art, installation, painting, photography, and videos (Site 2018; Zhang 2018). The show, however, was forced to shut down twenty days after the opening, even though it was planned for four months until the 27th of September. A banned exhibition is in China often ambiguously labelled ‘dangerous’ or illegal to the public. In most cases, the official verdict is only verbally delivered by local police officers. During the twenty days of opening, it was a battle of strategy between the local authorities and gallery over whether they could keep the artworks on display in the exhibition. The curating committee was reluctant to accept the decision of authorities to take some of the artworks away. The committee agreed to cover some artworks with cloth to gain approval.

Curator Shuai Hao explained the exhibition had three main aspects: first, the aspect of thought, such as the relationship between people and others, people and society, people and religion, people and nature; second, the aspect of art history, including the relationship between art and people, art and society, art and religion, and art
and nature; and finally, the aspect of history, anthropology and sociology such as the relationship of countryside and cities, modern countryside and traditional countryside, countryside tradition and modern civilization (Shuai 2018). Dr Hao Qingsong, who was also the academic advisor for the exhibition, clearly pointed out the historical meaning of the exhibition as such:

In the process of modernization, we need to care for rural areas. In the 20th century in China, Chinese art history shares the isomorphic fate of the countryside's history. The purpose of this art exhibition is to rewrite the history of Chinese modern and contemporary art. However, in established and distorted art history, art about the countryside covers over the real lives of ordinary people in the countryside. The true reality of this history should be part of art's value. History will be rewritten by this new worldview to recover the real history of the countryside and art's righteousness (Artron 2018).

Officials from the local censorship department visited several times, in a protracted negotiation over what and how works were to be censored. As Wan-Chia Wang reports in his Master’s thesis, Censorship and Subtle Subversion in Chinese Contemporary Art (2013), there are four conditions for art exhibitions (Wang, W. 2014, 19):

1. No works contradicting the ruling party’s four cardinal principles are permitted.
   The works need to:
   (1) Uphold the socialist path
   (2) Uphold the dictatorship of the proletariat
   (3) Uphold the leadership of the Communist Party
   (4) Uphold Marxist-Leninist and Maoist thought.

2. Pornographic and obscene works are prohibited.

3. Performance art is prohibited.
As described above, artworks included in this exhibition reflected issues that have occurred in the countryside in China during the last one hundred years. The story behind the censorship of the exhibition, below, may sound horrendous but it is the reality.

Wang Peng’s Ruins (2010) and Grove Monument (2018) were created in memory of the aborted 0.4 billion foetuses resulting from the One Child Policy enforced in 1978. The policy was mainly directed at Han people, which means that each Han couple were only officially allowed to have one child if the couple were residing in the countryside. If their first child was a girl, when she reached the age of 7 years old the couple were permitted to have another child. The One Child Policy was brutal, cruel and bloody. If the authorities were to discover a pregnant woman who already had one or more children the government forced her to have an abortion and permanent contraception surgery afterwards, no matter at what stage of the pregnancy (Sun 2017, 11). The most cruel story was the 'No children within 100 days movement (白日无孩运动)' also known as the 'Lambs Massacre' in Guan and Shen counties in ShanDong province in 1991 (Dai 2018, 13; Lin 2017). It was a movement advocated by the county secretary, Zeng Zhaoqi, who enforced a policy that no Han children were allowed to be born within the period of 100 days, from the first of May to the tenth of August 1991 (Li 2017, 6). During those 100 days, to Han people, no matter if they were the first or second child, they had to be aborted (Yang 2016).

Wang’s Ruins and Grove monument (Figure 5) are memorial artworks for the children who died as a result of these policies. He painted foetuses on the book called Mao Zedong Thought which is a central ideological source for the control of the minds of Chinese people. The foetuses were all painted in the colour pink, but the viewers could see the shapes of the foetuses, just like they would be in the womb. They photographed 366 pieces of the pink foetuses and collaged them together to create a photograph. Viewers can see the shape of the foetuses and the details of Mao Zedong Thought. The contrast between ideological control and human rights is what the artist is questioning. Ideology depicted a utopian world in which everyone is equal and happy, yet in reality millions of Chinese citizens could
not save the lives of their unborn children. The cruel reality is that these parents had to sacrifice their children for the promise of a better future.

Figure 5. Wang Peng, Monument. 2010, progress views of monument been censored mixed media.
Source: artist

Due to the ageing Chinese population, more than 30 years of the One Child Policy propaganda, and pressure resulting from the high cost of living, many young people voluntarily accept to have one child and many couples even choose to have no children at all. In 2015 the government allowed Han people to have two children. However, the influence of the policy still exists, despite the government hard work to cover up and forget the history. Naturally, this kind of artwork is challenging for the government which attempt to maintain its image. Before the exhibition, these two pieces of work were not allowed to be exhibited. After some negotiation they were permitted to be included but had to change the name from Ruins and Grove Monument to Life that has a more neutral interpretation. Yet the monument that was carved with the words, "the spiritual monument of the children died from the One Child Policy," that had to be covered in fabric (Wang Peng 2018). The opening day of the exhibition was busy and the government finally forced the gallery to remove the monument, leaving just the base. The images on the wall were also forcibly removed and replaced by some colourful, happy-toned scenery. Wang did a performance by calling the audience to pray for those children after the monument was taken away.

Wang is considered as a sensitive artist and he is constantly monitored by the government. This is partly because he was one of the student protesters at
Tiananmen Square. His original inspiration for these works was his experience working as a painter in the hospital. One day, when he walked passed the delivery room, he accidently saw some foetuses in the rubbish bin. He was shocked by how the hospital treated the bodies, and the way that life is disrespected there and in the country as a whole. Wang explains in his artist statement that:

During the enforcement of 37 years One Child Policy, the distorted system has revealed the cruelty and ignorance of humanity, plus the long-term brain-washing education that make me feel nihilistic to life. The nihilistic feeling made me question the meaning of lives (Wang Peng 2018)

Another censored work in *Wild Field* was Wang Huan’s *Shen Jilan* (2018) (Figure 6). This depicted the puppet status of the people’s representative for the National People’s Congress (NPC). In the paintings, an old woman with short hair and a red face, holds her right hand up and eyes closed in the meeting. This vividly described the position of the NPC representatives in that they don’t have the power to make any suggestions and decisions (Luo 2018, 11). Rather, they blindly follow orders and decisions made by the leading party. The depicted woman never questions right or wrong, but simply follows (Luo 2018). The red face represents the communist ideology, in which its representatives have lost the ability to think and behave as puppets.
Shen Jilan is from ShanXi province and is 84 years old. She was the national women’s model in China, and she has been the NPC representative twelve times. When Shen Jilan is mentioned in China, the impression is that she would never veto any NPC decisions or policies (Qiao 2018, 3). This means she would never veto political movements such as the Cultural Revolution, which almost ruined China’s culture. Furthermore, she has never regretted what she has done as a NPC representative, being proud to simply follow orders. The meaning for her as the people’s representative is to "press the agree button" (Luo 2018, 8). She is metaphorically a stamp for decisions, rather than to question, argue and propose any alternative suggestions. In this she is the same as most NPC representatives. The thousands of representatives exist to validate the procedure and do this by following the orders made by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

Wang Yongsheng’s paintings also attracted the censors in Wild Field. Wang’s paintings express his understanding of individual needs in a collective social environment. In The Spiritual Conclusion of the Anxious Conjunction between Urban and Rural (2017) (Figure 7), black is the base colour, framing a group of figurative people following a giant leader who emerges from darkness, far away from the light.
Figure 7. Wang Yongsheng, *The Spiritual Conclusion of the Anxious Conjunction between Urban and Rural*. 2017, Oil Painting, 322X538cm. Source: artist. (Before)

Figure 8. Wang Yongsheng, *The Spiritual Conclusion of the Anxious Conjunction between Urban and Rural*. 2017, Oil Painting, 322X538cm. Source: artist. (Before)

The giant looks aimless and wandering, while the followers look tortured and similarly aimless. This is a reflection of socialism in China, as the great mind is the
leading figure with orders and directions for the people, and the people have only the right to follow, not to question or have different ideas. In the second painting, *Nowhere to Settle Down* (2017), a giant monster with many paws crawling on top of the group of figures, creates a compressed atmosphere. Everyone is controlled by the monster’s hands. The figures at the bottom either look mindless, shocked, repressed or are in some way struggling. The painting vividly describes the repression of collectivism on individual desire and human needs (Ai 2015, 14). Both paintings are in the expressionist style without any clear icons or symbols. However, in the *Wild Field* exhibition, this mode of expression is not accepted by the authorities, so at the opening day, the gallery pasted some cartoon-like images (Figure 8), painted by the producer Liu Heyin, to cover the figurative heads in order to pass the censorship inspection.

Wang Yongsheng is ethnically Han and was adopted by a family of the Uyghur minority in XinJiang province. Uyghur is the only Caucasian ethnic group among the 56 ethnicities in China (Shuai 2017, 5). Conflict between the Uyghur and the central government has existed for a long time, and erupted in the '7.5' event in 2009, which caused the deaths of thousands of Uyghur people. On the 5th July 2009, a protest for injustice in the Shao Guan Event attended by more than thousands of Uyghur people was violently suppressed by the Chinese authority. Information revealed that thousands of people were killed by the government however officially it was reported that only 184 were killed. Media was not allowed to interview and information on line was censored. In the following three month, information revealed that more than thousands of people were arrested or disappeared (An and Yu 2009).

After the event, suspicions between the Uyghur and Han ethnic groups became severe. Today, Wang no longer considers Xinjiang his hometown, and this identify loss and confusion are visible in his paintings (Hao 2017, 23). His Uyghur identity is also a sensitive one, and attracts the concern of the authorities, which was likely to be another cause for the closure of the exhibition.
In his photographic work, *Settled down in a prosperous and contented life* (2018) (Figure 9), Guo Xiaojun assembled 18,000 images collected online that depicting miserable lives in the countryside. Some images showed farmers’ houses being forcibly dismantled, others show children selling themselves to raise money to cure their parents’ illnesses, as well as pictures of LBC. Guo arranged small prints of these images to create an alternative, larger image that looks harmonious and prosperous from afar. The harmonious image depicts one wall of a farmer’s house that typically functions as an entryway, presented before entering the main room. This wall is a typical decoration for the farmers’ house and is illustrated with beautiful scenery, which carries the hope and dreams of the farmers. It is possible to see on such walls paintings of plum blossoms, orchid, bamboo and chrysanthemum, respectively symbolising the nation’s characteristics of pride, politeness, modesty, and honesty. In addition some families like to apply Chinese characters for fortune and lucky. The disastrous images that Guo uses instead create a visual disparity between the farmer’s ‘dream’ and their reality. The contrast between the dream and the reality is the status of the countryside in current China.

![Image of art installation](image.jpg)

*Figure 9. Guo Xiaojun, *Settled Down in a prosperous and contented life*. 2016, photography, 360x900cm. Source: artist. (Before)*
In the last 40 years, since the Opening and Reforming policy, the countryside has paid a dramatic cost for the development of China. There is inequality in the treatment people from urban and rural areas receive from the government. The rural areas have provided support for the development of urban areas, for instance many young labourers have sought work in the cities, leaving the elderly and children in the countryside. During the urbanization process, houses have been compulsorily demolished. The people in the rural areas do not have equal access to medical care as do the people in urban areas. In the eighteen thousand pictures of Guo’s work, viewers can see what has happened in the past few years, this reality of the countryside that however, seen from far away appears beautiful and harmonious, just as the Chinese government would like us to see it.

At the opening of this exhibition, Guo Xiaojun’s work was not allowed to be shown to the public without a cover. Therefore, the gallery had to use a curtain to cover the whole wall, and a STOP TOUCHING sign on the wall to ensure people were unable to see the details. Meanwhile, the gallery had to project something “beautiful” onto the picture wall to disguise the real content (Figure 9). Despite this, hundreds of people attended the opening and some people went behind the curtain and aroused a lot of discussion on the censorship. This irritated the local authorities, and they ordered the gallery to seal the curtain with sticks and nails so that the audience could not open the curtain to see the details.
2.4 Artists’ Works that Have been Escaped from the Censorship

Despite intense attention from the authorities, artists can still use allegory or metaphor to create artworks that elude censorship. Two examples are described here; the photographs of Wang Qingsong and the sculptures and installations of Ai Song. These show how Chinese artists can be socially engaged while also get away from censorship.

Wang Qing-song was born in 1966 in Hei Longjiang, grew up in Hubei province, and witnessed the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) as well as the major social changes since then, especially since the ‘Reforming and Opening’ of China since 1978. Art China published Wang’s work and interpreted that the transformation of Chinese society in politics, economics and culture created a distinct environment for Wang Qingsong to develop his work (Yi 2008, 5-8). Wang’s awareness of the market economy and its impact upon an atheist and socialist country has been the main theme of his work. On the one hand, the public has been embracing the huge wealth brought by the ‘Reforming and Opening’ policy; on the other hand, without any...
moral bottom line in this atheist country, the public have to face social issues caused by economic development such as the environment’s deterioration, food safety, the medical system becoming market driven, and the widening gap between urban and rural areas (China 2008). The artist combines his own experience with his doubts on the current situation of society in his work.

Today, Wang Qingsong is one of the most well known Chinese conceptual photographic artists, and he is successful in the market for new contemporary Chinese artists. His work *Follow Me* (2003) received the highest auction record of USD$318,400 among Chinese photographers at Sothebys in New York in 2006 (Wai 2017). Wang uses applied photography as a way to respond to the rapidly changing society, repeatedly stressing that he is a "journalist" doing "news photography" (Wai 2017). Wang believes that there is not individualism in China. From the perspective of thought, people’s minds are still not liberated, the ideology of Culture Revolution still heavily influencing Chinese society. That’s one of the reasons why he focuses on the extreme tendencies of Chinese society (Peschel 2017, 1). He works with exaggerated content and grand, shocking and spectacular scenes, to reflect social issues. With staged photographs of well-arranged details in complicated compositions, Wang’s images deliver the drama of particular social issues (Wang, J. 2015). The concept of photography is here not as a way of capturing the truth, but to present a virtual truth by staged photography (Cao 2011; Jia 2016). Wang was a painter before turning to be a photographic based artist. In the 1990s, he observed the dramatic change in Chinese society, to realize that painting is not a suffice media to express his observation and concepts (Hua 2017). The spiritual values of Wang’s work lie in his focus and sensitivity to social issues, his pursuit in rethinking history. Art critic Cao Yuan explained that Wang Qingsong does his best to present gaudy scenes that are more exaggerated than real life (Cao 2011). For example, *Night Revel of Lao Li* (2000) (Figure 11) criticizes the corruption and repression of Chinese intellectuals. *Follow Me* (2003) and *Follow Him* (2010) criticize the Chinese education system. Most of the time, the artist places himself in the artwork, in *Follow Me* to witness the social changes of China and the great transformation of the world (Zheng 2011).
Figure 11. Wang Qingsong, *Night Revel of Lao Li*. 2000, C-print, 36.1cm×252cm. Source: artist.

Figure 12. Gu Xiongzhong, *Night Revel of Han Xizai*. 960, painting on scroll, 28.7cm×335.5cm.
Night Revel of Lao Li (2000) is an appropriation and imitation of a famous ancient Chinese artwork Night Revel of Han Xizai (960) (Figure 12) by Gu Gongzhong. It is about an intellectual Han Xizai who was not allowed to show his intelligence or ambition in the government in the South Tang dynasty, and turns instead to a gaudy life with concubines (Li, X. 2013).

Wang’s photograph Night Revel borrows the forms of the ancient painting Night Revel, to place Li Xianting in the artwork to replace Han Xizai and other female models with gaudy clothing to replace the concubines. Li Xianting is a famous Chinese contemporary art critic who is very sensitive for the Chinese government because he promotes those artworks that deal with social issues (Bao 2008). Wang borrows the situation of Han Xizai to be the metaphor of Li Xianting’s situation in the growing social material culture, with a value system distorted by this materialism, in order to depict the situation of all the contemporary Chinese intellectuals including himself in the one-party governing country where intellectuals have limited expression (Hua 2017). The situation of intellectuals in the past is used as a metaphor for the situation of intellectuals today.

Figure 13. Wang Qingsong, Follow Me. 2003, c-print,120cmx300cm. Source: artist.

Wang’s large format photography Follow You (2013), Follow Him (2010) and Follow Me (2003) (Figure 13) are made in his studio to stage social reality. In these two projects, Wang presents the way Chinese education has changed within the general transformation of China. On the large blackboard of Follow Me, Wang writes all kind of information in English and Chinese,
including "The Great Wall represents China, MacDonald’s sign represents the West," and "Lesson eight: Let China walk to the world, let the world know China". In front of black board, the artist acts as the teacher, pointing to the knowledge on the blackboard. On his desk sits a Chinese porcelain made brush holder, a bottle of Coca Cola and a globe, all these representing the mix of Western and Chinese culture, and the social transformation that has resulted.

![Image](image_url)

*Figure 14. Wang Qingsong, *Follow You*. 2013, C-print, 180x300cm. Source: artist.*

*Follow You* (Figure 14) was another photograph staged in Wang Qingsong’s studio, and based on a news story about a student who took the University entrance examination while hooked up to medical equipment. Wang bought twenty tons of books and staged more than a hundred students sleeping in the classroom while the artist himself acted as the patient, the only student awake, but looking with aimless eyes. The sleeping students may represent the lunchtime nap which is compulsory in China. The books accumulated on the desks are nearly as high as their heads, and may symbolise the seven compulsory units needed for the entrance exams, putting much pressure on students. This scene is exaggerated to present haunting and powerful visual impact (Zhuran and Yingzi 2013). At the back, the wall is full of posters of encouragement just like the typical Chinese slogans by the Communist
Party (CCP), such as "Study well, progress everyday" (好好学习，天天向上), and "For sustained development, education is crucial" (百年之计，教育为本), but they are also punctuated with giant question marks, showing the artist's doubts about the surreal, intense Chinese education system. In China, students studying for the University entrance exams work like machines from 8am to 10pm, five or even six days a week. The pressure to fight for the university entrance impacts upon their creativity and other social abilities (Wang 2013). The patient student in the image represents students' anxieties and hopelessness in front of this education system (China 2008). Wang's criticism is crucial. The artwork seems to be asking; is this the right way to cultivate our future generations? Is this right to use this method to train the students to be creative and undertake the responsibility of developing our country (Liu, Q. 2013)? The whole atmosphere gives the viewer a strong oppressive feeling, as the crowded people, books, and posters in the classroom give the feeling that there is no space to rest and escape. This photograph offers a satirical way for Wang to criticise Chinese education.

China is a degree-oriented country, and the university Chinese Entrance Examination which is described as "the single bridge" is very influential for Chinese students to seek a better future, particularly for those students who don't have a rich family or any political background which could provide different way of living (Wang and Ross 2010). Most Chinese people thinks the entrance exam still the fairest way for the students from the rural areas to get better lives because the people from the rural areas don't have the same rights as the people from the urban areas due to the household registration (hukou) restriction (Zhou, Murphy; and Tao 2014, 273). China does not have a lifetime education system for people to go to university again when they are older, which means if you miss the examination, you miss the opportunity. Some students repeat their senior year for many years to ensure they improve enough to get into college (Wang and Ross 2010). For many people who miss the exams, their social status and income will be very different from those who achieved a university degree. For example, once I was awarded a university degree in China, I got paid RMB7000 a month as a translator, but most of my classmates who don't
have a university degree can only work on a production line in a factory or as labourers on construction sites for very low payments.

Contemporary Chinese artist Ai Song also addresses social issues, in allegorical ways. Ai was born in 1969, and grew up in the Cultural Revolution as a child. The strong atmosphere of ideology during this time and afterward influenced him to create some ideological symbols in his art such as The Castle (Figure 15), Tiananmen, the People’s Monument, and Mao’s Palm of Power. Each of these icons has some connection with authoritarianism in Chinese history. He explains that it was shocking to him when he found that his education was not true, and that he was part of a totalitarian system of constraint (Ai, S. 2013, 12-19). Ai uses barbed wire as the material for his work. This material is transformed into the concepts and languages of contemporary art, and hence gain energy. Barbed wire implies imprisonment, persecution, blockade, deprivation, dictatorship, and painful imagination. In Ai’s interpretation, the barbed wire symbolises different kinds of slavery, to block, to hurt and restrain freedom. For him, the barbed wire is a symbol of totalitarianism (Ai, S. 2013).

Figure 15. Ai Song, the Castle, 2011. Barbed Wire 1500X130X150cm. Source: artist

Ai spends long hours welding these barbed wires to build these figures. It is easy to get hurt by the wires, which makes him feel the torture of wars and violence (Liu, J. 2013a). In an article on Ai’s work, Chinese art critic Ran Yunfei describes the way that Chinese people have lost their original thought but now just follow the direction of
CCP. This is the experience of a barbed wire cage, Ai’s walls are allegories of the blocked freedom of the Chinese people (Ran 2013).

Ai Song’s works are reminders of totalitarian violence, that various images of political idols and sublime rituals are sacred props for enslaving the freedom of people. Regardless of past or present, legalized state violence is destructive. Only when all people are passionate against totalitarian politics, the liberal progress of society can be maintained. His works arouse people to be aware of the living reality of a country built by revolutionary violence and that is bound to use violence to consolidate its power. Choosing the dehumanizing language of barbed wire, Ai wants to wake people to an awareness of their own imprisonment, and of the violence and deprivation that surrounds them (Cheng 2013). The barbed spikes symbolize the nature of the system, including the way that the wire’s rust and decay symbolizes the fate of the system (Li, X. 2013). The rusty Castle (2011) shows that any dehumanizing ideology and social system will not last long after all (Xia 2013). Any ideology or social system should not underestimate the spirit of seeking freedom and returning to humanity in everyone’s heart. Ai Song applies the characteristics of the barbed wire to convey his attitude and voices the situation of restrained freedom, but not directly. By this means he has also so far eluded censorship. He also does this by calling his artwork Castle instead of the direct name Tiananmen that would deliver more subversive connotations.
Chapter Three: Left Behind Children (LBC) in China

The chapter addresses the situation of the ‘Left Behind Children’ (LBC) in China. These children are being raised by their grandparents or great grandparents whilst their own parents work in cities sometimes thousands of kilometers away. The aim of this chapter is to provide some background information and describe the negative effects on the LBC of policies and political circumstances that have led to this situation. In the first section, I will talk about my intentions, the personal reasons that driven me to conduct this research and to make artwork about the LBC. Secondly, I will talk about the background that caused the phenomenon of the estimated 61 million LBC (Nanfangzhoumo 2016, 1; Liang, Wang, and Rui 2017). I will show three reasons why children of migrant workers are forced to stay in the home villages. The first reason is household registration, the second is the financial burden and third the lack of care for the children in the cities. Thirdly, I will talk about influence of this on the children in this situation.

In 2013, after graduating with an Advanced Diploma of Photo-imaging, I became a professional family portrait photographer in Perth, Western Australia. When I was commissioned to shoot family portraits, I noticed that typically the family unit consisted of mum, dad and the children. When interacting with them, engaging in ‘game playing’ to capture what might be remembered as the happiest moments of their lives, I often sensed how much love the children had for, and from, their parents. On one occasion, the mum confessed to me that she was actually separated from her husband, and that he had agreed to come for the family portrait so that the children could feel that their family unit was somehow still complete. This made me realised how importance for children to have complete families and to be loved by their parents. The comparison to the attitude of Australian families made me realize that the phenomenon of LBC is devastating for all members of the family.

Later, when I travelled to Wanzhou, my hometown in China, I similarly enjoyed taking family portraits for my neighbours and sometimes gave these images to them.
as gifts. It was during this time I realized that these 'family portraits' predominantly consisted of the children and their grandparents, the parents being a noticeable absence in the image. I later discovered that a special term has been given to these children, the ‘Left Behind Children’ or Liu Shou Er Tong (留守儿童) A household survey paper made in China’s Sichuan and Hubei Provinces explored the influence of household structure on migration decisions. It suggests that in the three-generation household structure, the elderly play an important role in looking after the LBC to encourage and support younger generations to seek jobs in the cities (Fengbo et al. 2016, 281). In China, culturally and historically, parents still live with young generations and the elderly take responsibility of the grandchildren. It is widely accepted in Chinese society and culture. So that the LBC have emerged out of a traditional Chinese family structure (Ye, Wu, and Meng 2015, 3).

The phenomenon of the LBC touched me even more deeply when I had experienced it in my own family. My nephew became one of the LBC when he was 8 years old. It was, in fact, originally my suggestion that my financially burdened brother and sister-in-law leave my nephew to live with my mum and go to work in the city of ZhuHai (in GuangDong province, close to Macao) where there are many manufacturing companies.

Whilst at the time this outcome seemed a positive one, I did not then realize how much sorrow it would bring for my 8-year old nephew. His parents, my elder brother and sister-in-law, only returned home twice during the fifteen years after they had left the village. Initially, when my nephew’s parents left, one of the neighbours taunted him by saying that his parents had abandoned him. My nephew has grown to be a quiet, sensitive and introverted young man, especially during his teenage years. I now feel how much attention and love he needed from his parents, despite the fact that my mother cared for him with much tenderness.

The insight I experienced during my 2013 visit to Wanzhou was that my nephew is just one of the millions of LBC in China. This led me to act and do something positive in recognition of their suffering.
The Background of Left Behind Children

China’s economic development and its transition to a socialist market economy is a relatively recent occurrence. It is an economic transition characterised by rapid growth, first in agricultural output and then increasingly in manufacturing (Fengbo et al. 2016). Internal migration from rural to urban areas has been driven by several factors, including the demand for cheap, unskilled labour in the expanded cities; the establishment of secondary and tertiary industries such manufacturing, food and clothes production; as well as increasing levels of impoverishment in the countryside (Ye 2011, 614; Huang 2015). The metropolitan centres of Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen and Guangzhou are the nation’s largest, busiest, wealthiest, and most developed cities. The growth of the Chinese manufacturing sector, especially in and around these cities, has meant that more and more farmers, both men and women, are leaving their villages to find employment in factories in the city. According to the National Bureau of Statistics’ 2012 census, over the previous few decades since 1978 an estimated 163.4 million migrant workers left their homes in the countryside to find work in major cities (Zhou, Murphy, and Tao 2014, 273).

The startling factor associated with this figure is that this number relates specifically to those migrants who left their children behind at home to be cared for by relatives. The influx of peasant workers (known as nong-ming-gong) being lured to cities for better job prospects has led to an estimated sixty-one million children who have been left behind in rural communities in 2016 in China (Nanfangzhoumo 2016, 4).

The first reason that the LBC cannot live with their parents lies in the household registration system (hukou) that treats people from the countryside differently from those in the cities (Jijiao 2011, 8-12). Children born in the countryside are registered as rural household, while children born in the city are registered to an urban household if their parents have an urban household (Mu 2016, 279-280). Those children born in the cities who are from rural families will however only be registered to rural households if their parents don’t have an urban household (Xiaogang 2011; Buzinkai and Skvnda 2014; Huang 2015, 3). This is
important because under the nation’s institutional separation policy (between urban and rural areas) there are distinctions in the welfare system based on their type of household (Jijiao 2011, 8-12). As JingZhong Ye states in "Left-behind children: the social price of China’s economic boom":

Considerably less attention has been paid to the social effects of a split family life. In China, in spite of their enormous economic contribution to urban development, migrant workers usually cannot move their families to the cities. This is due to the institutional segregation between rural and urban areas, their own economic constraints and the absence or curtailment of their ‘citizenship’ rights (Ye 2011, 614).

The result of rural-urban hukou registration is disparity: an urban hukou is considered much better than a rural hukou with its many institutional benefits such as access to education and welfare. The disparity encourages peasants with rural hukou to leave the countryside and apply for an urban hukou. However, to apply for an urban hukou is not easy at all, because the government imposes severe restrictions in its hukou access policies with the excuse to head off a potential urban influx (Chan 2010, 357-360). The change of hukou status had to be compulsorily approved by the authorities at both the place of origin and the destination. There are some avenues for rural hukou holders to obtain an urban residency status, such as a civil service job after completing higher education, to enlist in military service or to marry someone who has an urban hukou. It is very difficult for peasants to meet any of the requirements. In this way, rural-urban migration was effectively restrained by the government until the economic reforms of 1978 (Huang 2015, 3).

The registered rural household residence of the LBC is not entitled to receive the same welfare benefits as those afforded to registered urban household residences (Xiaogang 2011). As a result, these rural children are often deprived of the social benefits and educational opportunities provided to their urban counterparts. The household registration system also means that migrant workers from rural areas have little or no opportunity to become permanent urban residents (Huang 2015, 5).
Because of *hukou*, a child cannot live with his or her migrant parents in the cities (Fengbo et al. 2016). Workers and their children from rural areas can only receive rural education and medical welfare. Migrant workers from these rural areas are treated as temporary workers and their choices for living in the cities are limited. These migrant workers have to apply for temporary working and residential permits before they can live in the cities, otherwise they would be escorted back to their hometown where their *hukou* is registered. Under this circumstances, to bring their children to live and study in the cities is a big issue (Xu 2015, 46). If the migrant workers want to bring their children to get education in the cities, they have to pay high extra registration fee. The migrant workers undertake low paying jobs, and the registration fee becomes an extra financial burden for the family household (Chan 2010, 359-360). Another reason is that even if the migrant workers could afford the fee for the children to study in the cities, the children cannot take university entrance examinations except in the provinces where their *hukou* is registered (Xiao 2013, 5). This unequal treatment of children from rural areas, where it is harder to qualify for university study, is another reason why they stay in rural areas and grow up with grandparents with the absence of parents (Zhou, Murphy, and Tao 2014, 273).

In the history of communist China, working class residents of urban areas have long been regarded by the Party as pioneers and the leaders of the revolutionary force, while the peasants were viewed as their followers. Parallel *hukou* systems with unequal welfare and treatment were therefore introduced: the urban *hukou* and rural *hukou*. A person with an urban *hukou* might be working for the government or at a work unit (*danwei*) in a state-owned enterprise (SOE) (Chan 2010, 358-361). Each work unit could build factories and public housing for its employees on the state-owned land. The urban *hukou* are eligible to access public amenities and social services funded by the government such as healthcare, pensions, and education (Huang, Yan, and Wu 2016, 173-174). In contrast, rural people working on collective farms in the villages were excluded from the state-financed welfare system.
The disparity in treatment in education and welfare within the *hukou* system has resulted in tens of millions of LBC in the countryside (Jiang and Kuang 2018, 1-3). Thus, a substantial proportion of rural households have adopted a strategy that the younger married couples work in the urban area while their elderly parents remain in the rural area to look after the grandchildren as well as keep working on the land to maintain household land rights. The migrants typically send money home and return once a year during the Chinese spring festival for a week. This is the way that the family spend time together in China.

The national government has started to reform the *hukou* system. Most municipal governments now allow migrants to obtain a local *hukou* registration if they purchase an apartment (e.g. Jiangsu Provincial Government, 2003). But with the high prices of apartments in China, it is very difficult for most rural migrants to afford (Huang 2015, 3-6). According to National Statistics in 2005, in their destination cities, less than 5% of the rural migrants own accommodation, whereas more than 80% of established urban residents are homeowners (National Statistics, 2005).

In many cases, working in the cities has dramatically increased the incomes of rural people. However, it has also have increased their vulnerability and stress. For Chinese peasant migrants, employment can often be insecure and income flow is unstable (Migration 1996, 4). Because they do not have the same rights to access medical welfare, any serious illness afflicting either migrants themselves or one of those left behind means that they are forced to return home either to seek care or a new job. In the urban areas, the migrant workers are also forbidden to build a shack for themselves. It is also very difficult for them to gain access to any form of public-rental housing in their destination city because they do not have a formal residential registration status (Jijiao 2011, 821-824). In this situation, they have to rely on their own energy, skills, and resources to get accommodation Low-cost private-rental housing in ‘urban villages’ near where they are working are often their only choices. These shelter places for the migrant workers often only provide poor-quality housing conditions (Zhang, Y. 2017, 729-730). This situation becomes another obstacle for migrant workers bringing their children to live with them. If they bring the children
to the cities, looking after them and taking them to school is another issue. High costs in the cities makes the situation unrealistic for them to bring the parents to the cities to take care of the children. One of the families I interviewed, Tan Shiwen, had to lock their child called Tan Wenqi in their rental apartment at night by herself since she was two-years old due to the parents having to work twelve hours a day. Now Tan Wenqi is ten years old, she has been locked in the apartment on her own at night while her parents work night shift in a factory for eight years (Tan 2017).

Recently, rural migrant workers have been forced to relocate in cities due to the ongoing demolition-led redevelopment of urban villages, forcing rural migrants to relocate within the cities. In general for this reason, urban redevelopment will increase the price of accommodation which means the availability of low-cost rental housing will decrease. Some scholars therefore worry that the housing situation for the rural migrants might become more serious (Knowles 2016, 16). For this reason, getting their children to live and study in the urban areas becomes more and more difficult.

LBC may only see their parents once a year, or perhaps even once every few years. A study by Jingxin Zhao et al. (2015) focusing on 448 students aged between seven and sixteen from three schools in Sichuan Province in China revealed that LBC demonstrated lower levels of happiness and self-esteem than non-LBC. LBC children also presented higher levels of anxiety, loneliness and depression. Further research has also shown that, due to separation from their parents, LBC are less interested in life and reluctant to communicate with others (Zhao, Liu, and Wang 2015, 192-197). Jingzhong Ye & Lu Pan also found that LBC demonstrate more unusual or inappropriate behaviours to gain attention from their relatives, as well as to deal with the anxiety caused by parental separation. Other literature has demonstrated that the LBC may be suffering a greater risk of depression, anxiety, and loneliness. The LBC are also reported to have lower levels of satisfaction with life, including lower levels of happiness and quality of life (Dai and Chu 2016, 1-3). These negative effects tend to be worsening in cases of long-term parental migration and separation from children (Ye and Lu 2011, 358-361). Cuong Nguyen found that whilst parental
migration does lead to increased income, it does not lead to improved health and cognitive well-being in children. Clearly there is a psychological and emotional impact on LBC emerging from the long-term absence of their parents (Nguyen 2016, 232-234; Mu 2016; Jingzhong and Lu 2011). But, perhaps equally, there are also challenges for their grandparents or carers. Typically, grandparents raise their grandchildren according to the ideas and values of their own generation. Most of the grandparents in the countryside feel disconnected from the fast-paced changes which are occurring in modern China.

The most direct benefit of migration is remittance; goods and money that migrants send to their home households (Zhou, Murphy, and Tao 2014, 274). Families benefit financially from the parents’ remittances, which can increase material living quality and nutrition for children. Remittances to rural households from parental migration can improve the quality of children’s daily lives. In fact, several studies have found that migration and remittances lead to an increase in children’s educational levels and a reduction in child labour. In such instances, the family’s additional income is spent on better food, health and education. Nevertheless, parental absence means that children are given less attention and care, leading to a negative effect on children’s health and education. Because most of the grandparents received very limited education, and some grandparents never went to school, they have limited knowledge about nutrition and education (Zhou, Murphy, and Tao 2014, 277). Most research has shown that children experience poorer levels of educational attainment and health, and are required to take more responsibility for housework, and sometimes on farms or even to take care of dependent family members, spending less time on education and leisure (Wang, L. 2014, 25-26).

The creative component of Left Behind Children

As part of my research, I received human ethics clearances from the University of Western Australia to interview families and LBC (see Appendix 2). One of my interviewees Xiang Jun, a 22 years old has been a LBC for more than fifteen years. He told me that his grandparents can’t read and write, and therefore cannot help with his studies. There is a big gap between him and his grandparents. In 2015 I produced
a documentary video in which I interviewed a boy whose parents had been away working in the city called ZhuHai (part of GuangDong province, close to Macao) for ten years (Xiang 2016). He told me that when he is unhappy he cannot share this with his grandparents because they "don't understand how he feels." According to other family members, the boy has become increasingly introverted during his teenage years. When this boy encounters difficulties in his studies, he similarly feels he cannot approach his grandparents, knowing that they have no understanding of the content of the lessons.

The absence of parental care also leaves the LBC in a vulnerable situation. An investigation by the ACWF All-China Women's Federation showed that 77 percent of the country's LBC have been assaulted (Yin 2016). Chinese newspaper NanFang ZhouMo reports that there were 125 reported cases of sexual abuse on LBC in 2013; more than 500 reported cases in 2014; and 340 in 2015. Of the 340 cases of sexual abuse reported in 2015, 240 were perpetrated by people such as teachers and neighbours who should be holding positions of trust among the children. In XiuShuiliang village, Xialingwu city (NingXia Autonomous Region), 12 girls were sexually assaulted by their teacher (Nanfangzhoumo 2016). Sexual abuse during childhood creates heavy psychological shadow in the children's future lives, particularly in Conservative china, where traditionally believed that sex can only happen between couples after marriage. There are no formal supporting mechanisms to help migrants' families and children to overcome their hardships. As a result, victims of sexual abuse are further victimised by societal attitudes towards them and make them socially handicapped. For reasons of social prejudice, the circumstances of sexual abuse of LBC often go unreported.

In November 2012, winter in Bijie county, southwest China's Guizhou Province, five LBC were found dead from anthracaemia (carbon monoxide poisoning) resulted from a wood fire they used to keep warm. These five LBC did not have any adult carers as their parents were working in ShenZhen (GuangDong province) thousands of miles away from their hometown. The eldest was just thirteen years old, the youngest nine years old. It was an event which received little media attention. Three
years later, in June 2015 and in the same county, four LBC siblings committed suicide at home by drinking pesticide. According to reports their parents had divorced and their father was working in South China's Hainan Province at the time. No other relative was taking care of them, nor anyone from the government welfare institute. This left the responsibility for the care of the children in the hands of the eldest child, who was just thirteen years old (Nanfangzhoumo 2016). According to the All-China Women’s Federation’ 2013 report, more than two million left-behind children in China live alone without guardians. That means the legal awareness of the LBC is very weak (Yin 2016).

The LBC phenomenon has received some attention from the media both in China and abroad. In searching the literature I found a great deal of published material from the social sciences on the topic of the LBC from sociology, psychology, and education (Meyerhoefer and Chen 2011; Mu 2016; Tang et al. 2016; Zhang, N. 2016). The mainstream media has also covered the issue, including in the book Stay Together- a report of Chinese Left Behind Children by the newspaper Chinese Southern Weekend (南方周末) (Nanfangzhoumo 2016) as well as reports from the British Broadcasting Corporation and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (Sudworth 2016, Carney 2016). There are also documentary videos, including Three Sisters (San Zi Mei三姊妹 2012) by the Chinese director Wang Bin, that is now censored in China but still it is available to watch on Youtube (Wang Bin. 2012). Another movie about the LBC titled The Class of One （一个人的课堂） directed by Li Junlin was a typical public voice to fight for the equal education for the children from the rural areas, however it was also censored by the Chinese authority just a few days after it was published (Gong 2018; Li, J. 2018). Except those listed above, I have not found contemporary Chinese artists who have addressed this important social issue in the way of visual art. I have decided to undertake this project to produce both a creative visual component, and a dissertation, as a form of catharsis to relieve my own guilt, a special way to apologize to my nephew, and to give a public voice to those children who are now experiencing the same situation as did my nephew. In this project, I explore ways of giving a public voice to these sixty-one million LBC as well as avoid the strict censorship in mainland China.
In the past couple of years, I have tried to exhibit in galleries or publish online some of my artwork, but my project about the LBC, along with another 52 artists work in the *Wild Field* in Shi Jiazhuan China, was shut down by the local authority after twenty days. I posted twice on line but unfortunately I was censored just few hours after it was published. Later, two art critics wrote articles by art critics Hao Qingsong and Gu Kajun wrote on my LBC artworks, but were censored on line (Hao, Q. 2018; Gu, K. 2018). I suspect that the censors were alerted by my high school classmates, after I posted these essays online to my high school Wechat group. I was abused by most of my high school classmates who claim that I am a traitor to disclose the dark side of the Chinese society. This makes me wonder how in the future I should express my attitudes and voice while escaping from government censorship; how to find a way to make my work in a way and aesthetics that is subtle enough to avoid censorship, but strong enough to deliver my critical message.

This is one reason that I expanded the visual component of my research project from the *Wild Field* exhibition to include poetic woven works. This is in order to meet the expectations of different audiences and regulations in China and Australia. Another purpose is to disguise the sensitive subject matter. The woven version of this work has taken the facial identity away which is less likely to cause future problems for the participants in China. These woven pieces are a series called “*Family Portraiture* 全家福” (Figure 16). The artworks consist of thirteen woven family portrait images with dimensions of 1.3 metres wide by 90 cm high mounted on the wall, and more than a hundred portrait images of LBC placed on the floor as an installation.
Figure 16. Tami Xiang, *Peasantography. Family Portrait*. 2018, Photography, 130x90cm. Source: artist

The inspiration of weaving came from my childhood memory when I was living in China. First, weaving is a traditional way for Chinese farmers to make farming and daily-life tools, particularly in the southern provinces such as Wanzhou where my research project was conducted. The southern parts of China has many flexible and strong bamboos. In the weaving process, bamboo is cut in to strips to make things like pack baskets and dustpans for farming or house tools for farmers. Due to the migration of laborers from rural areas to the cities, farming has lost its prosperity and woven products and the weaving skills are gradually disappearing. This method has inspired me to weave family portrait images together, to bring the subject matters from different parts of Chinese life together. In the process of cutting the photographic paper into strips, I thought about the LBC’s separation from their parents, and through bringing the pieces together, I also thought about their reunions. In the long hours making these works, I could feel the heartbreaking moments of their separation and reunion.

Weaving is a method called ‘bian zhi 纺织’ in Chinese culture; the woven bag is called ‘bian zhi dai 纺织袋’. Bian zhi dai are normally used by migrant farmers as travelling bags to hold their belongings. These particular bags are used because they
are large, cheap and strong. The weaving bags have become a symbol that identify the migrant workers form the rural areas. When I started learning English in the first semester of middle school our English teacher told us how to remember to spell the word FAMILY by reciting the phrase ‘Father And Mother I Love You’ (the acronym of which forms spells the word family). The meaning of the Chinese characters 全家福 (or family portraiture) is ‘the whole family are lucky and are blessed with fortune and happiness’. In my research project, however, the family portraits appear as broken pieces to form abstract images which contradict the traditional Chinese meaning of family portrait (全家福). For me, the families photographed in my research appear ‘broken’. They are separated from each other for sometimes years in order to survive financially and there is an emotional cost for grandparents, parents and children.

![Image](image.jpg)

Figure 17. Tami Xiang, *Peasantography. Family portrait*. 2018, Woven Photographic Paper, 130x90cm. Source: artist.

Dr Peter Pfrunder from the Swiss Foundation of Photography wrote me a recommendation letter saying:

The Left Behind Children project focuses on the victims of economic growth and gives them back their invoices and their visibility: listening to their stories and separation and loss, the artist uses that rhetoric of photographic portraits in the way that the victim can express themselves through their
eyes and in ways that expose themselves. These portraits are the result of an interpretation between the photographer and protagonists. Some kind of a solidarity which can be felt in the image they had the affect of statistics and demographic figures suddenly becoming very emotional and moving narratives. Transforming abstract theory into very personal stories with the approach of conceptual art rather than documenting a situation but communicating an idea and question the cruel and unfair system of China. The repetitive pattern conveying the message that the 63 million LBC in China draws attention to the LBC social issues in China and the influence these LBC will bring for future generations (Pfrunder 2018).

This research project and these artworks are just the first stage of a longer project. I hope to keep working with the group of people that I photographed and to continue giving them a voice. This will be a project that will extend over my (and their) lifetime, with the aim of investigating how the situation is in 20 years time or even 40 years time.
References

*Please note that reference titles below originally published in Chinese are translated by the candidate. In-text quotes above are also translated by the candidate.*


Chang, Bernard, and Chuihua Judy Chung (2001), Great leap forward, Project on the City 1, Köln: Taschen.


Guo, K. (2012), Thirty Two (San Shi Er), documentary movie, Si Chuan Guangying Culture and Communication Media, China.


Li, Xianting (2000), 重要的不是艺术 (*The Importance of Art is not Art Itself*), JiangSu: JiangSu Art Publication, China.


Nanfangzhoumo (2016), 一起，中国留守儿童报告, (Stay together, Reports of Left Behind Children in China), Beijing: Chinactic Press, P1.


Pfrunder, Peter (2018) "Recommendation Letter for Tami Xiang."


Shuai, Hao (2018), 旷野-百年中国乡建”艺术展——石家庄(图) (Wild Field- Preface of the Countryside Construction Art Exhibition), TJculture, 27 April,  

Sun, Kaili (2017), 惨无人道的“百日无孩”运动(The Cruel Movement of ‘No Children Allowed to be Born within One Hundred Days), Sound of Hope 3 September,  

Wai, Shuangnai (2017), 摄影，每个人的突破口-王庆松访谈 (Photography, the Breakout for Everyone: Interview),  
http://www.360doc.com/content/17/0614/21/4036344_663184266.shtml.  

Wang, Bing (2012), 三姊妹 (Three Sisters), Documentary film, Youtube posted 17 June, 2017,  

Wang, Jiang (2015) 王庆松谈长江国际双年展 影像之乱一网打尽(Wang Qingsong Comments on the International Changjiang Photography Biennale), Fengniao Image,  


Wang, Nanming (2017), 王南溟：艺术首先要介入社会, (Wang Nanming: The First Thing for Art is Engaged with Social Issues), Artron 9 March,  

Wang, Wan-Chia (2014), Censorship and subtle subversion in Chinese contemporary art,  


Wang, Qingsong (2013), 专访王庆松：谨慎的“观者 (Interview on Wang Qingsong : a Serious Observer), Artzoom, 18 April,  


Xu, Limin (2015), 农民工随迁子女的社会融入研究(Study on Social Inclusion of Migrant Workers’ Children in Cities), Beijing: Science Publisher.


Zhang, Yi (2017), "Unequal living condition between urban migrants and local residents in China," *Procedia Engineering* 198: 728-735.


Appendix 1: Ethic Approval

Appendix 2: Co-authored Article with Dr. Darren Jorgensen
Application for Human Ethics Review V2.2.6

Initial Information

Use this form to apply for ethical review of research involving people to be carried out at The University of Western Australia. Ethical review of research is a necessary pre-requisite for research involving humans at the University. This includes even research that studies data about people and observation of people.

Exempt or External

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exempt or External</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Do you seek exemption from review?

*Have you received ethics approval from another ethics review committee?

Reference Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference Information</th>
<th>UWA Reference Number</th>
<th>RA/4/1/9301</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

1. Project Title
   Left-Behind Chinese Children: An exhibition and thesis

2. Chief Investigator, or Supervisor in case of student research
   Xiang, Chengmei

*Chief Investigator’s Phone number* +61 433 444 461

*Are there any non UWA staff involved in the project?*

*Are there any additional UWA researchers / co-investigators, including students?*

*Is this a student project?*

*I agree to complete the submission within 30 days, I understand it will be withdrawn from the system, and will have to submit all of the data for the application again.*
Protocol Questions

Hyperlinked cross references to the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research are abbreviated below as NS & chapter. If you have any questions about the national statement, see UWA reference.

WARNING On some browsers when a link to an external page is selected the form appears to be lost. It has not been lost but can be located by checking the browser icon on your task bar.

3. Student Project

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Honour</th>
<th>Masters</th>
<th>PhD</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Ensure the student(s) are selected in the participants list.

* Provide the approved research proposal

See attached for the research proposal.

4. Team Expertise:

I have completed a three-year advanced photographic diploma and a bachelor degree of photography with skills of dealing with photographic issues. I have been working as a photographic artist for five years.

NS 3.3.5 NS 4.4.3 Explain how the research team has sufficient skills and experience to conduct the proposed clinical research.

5. Expected project end

End Date: 20th March 2019

6. How is the research funded?

Design school and the Graduate Research School of UWA.

Please provide project application title for funding if different from this application.

Funder, Scheme, reference number (as applicable). Please provide UWA grant reference number if applicable: RA/1/####/####

Is funding sought that is not yet approved? Respond to the potential conflict of interest question at the end of this form.

7. Aims of this project. (Layman’s terms):

The aims of this project are:

1. Create an exhibition of photographic art focusing on the ‘Left Behind Children’ form rural areas in China. These children are raised by their grandparents or great grandparents whilst their own parents work in cities, sometimes thousands of miles away.

2. Write a dissertation that contributes to the discourse surrounding current social and political issues in China and explores how contemporary art has the potential to raise awareness of a politically sensitive issue affecting thousands of rural families. The dissertation will provide background material that contextualises and theorises the creative component of the study. The intention of this study is to produce a body photographic artwork that places under the microscope human rights, the welfare of children, and in particular the inequality that exists between people from rural and urban areas in China.

Describe the purpose of this research in layman’s terms please. About 300 words recommended. Attach the research proposal to supply additional detail, background, research design, analysis and procedures where relevant.

8. Research design (include analysis & procedures if any):

This study adopts a mixed methods approach. In the first stage of data collection, I intend to administer a questionnaire to approximately 15 families. I will identify research participants who consent to complete a questionnaire. The second stage of data collection involves semi-structured interviews. The survey will allow me to construct a series of questions to explore participants’ understanding of what it means to be Left Behind Children. The interviews provide a rich source of information to better understand some of the principle issues I will explore in this study. The third stage of data collection involves taking photographs of families and these photographs will be used as part of the work in my exhibition. I will go on to record the interviews and transcribe and analyse the interviews.

Use this space to explain the research design sufficiently for the reviewers to understand how it will answer the research question(s). Attach your research protocol if it is a medical research or student research.

Include information about procedures to be carried out and your analytic methodology where appropriate. Explain if different groups of participants will be treated differently.

9. Sampling:

If participants are involved, explain how many and what kind of group are to be recruited and how the size and profile of the group is adequate to answer the research question.

10-15 Left Behind Children Children who are raised by grandparents while their parents working far away will be involved in this project, they are invited to answer a questionnaire about their situation. Interview will be recorded. See attached about the questionnaire.

10. Recruitment methods:

Please attach copies of advertisements, flyers, posters, emails, etc.

I'm originally from China and the place where I'm going to conduct my field trip is my hometown. I have personal contact with these group of people and I have worked with them two years ago on a photo journalism documentary.

11. Data management and publication plan:

Research records must be retained for a minimum of 7 years after date of publication or project completion, whichever is later (Western Australian University Sector Disposal Authority) see UWA reference.

Data will be digitized (in rich and plain text format) and stored on the UWA Institutional Research Data Store (IRDS). Non-digitized data will be kept in safe and secure storage.

Access to data will be restricted to me and Professor Darren Jorgensen and professor Ionat Zurr who may be contributing to potential publications emerging from the research.

Research material will be retained for a minimum period of 7 years after project completion. It will then be archived in accordance with the WA University Sector Disposal Authority Guidelines.

How and where will you record, store, share, transmit, and archive your data? Discuss retention, security and data sharing plans. How will you publish / disseminate your work.

Consult the Australian code for the responsible conduct of research, section 2; and, the UWA Research Management Toolkit.
12. Potential harms or risks to participants?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Explain how this research justifies the burden and risks to participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No potential harm or risk to participants will arise from this study.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

See NS §2.1 - consider illness or injury, potential side effects; but also include potential embarrassment, economic loss, exposure to prosecution, anything stressful, noxious or unpleasant. Ensure you address these in your Participant Information Forms (PIF) if you are using these.

13. Potential harms or risks to researchers?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Does this work open the research team to direct or indirect risk? Please explain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No potential harm or risk to participants will arise from this study.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

14. Will participants be given financial or non-financial incentives?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>NS §2.10-11 concerns inducements.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>NS §2.2 - payment that is disproportionate to the time involved, or any other inducement that is likely to encourage participants to take risks, is ethically unacceptable.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

15. Will all participants provide consent?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>*NS §2.2 concerns issues of consent. NS §2.3 concerns potential waiver of consent. Attach Participant Information and Consent Forms.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>*How will you obtain consent, or justify a waiver?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I will provide to those expressing a willingness to participate in the research an information form and a consent form (which, if they agree to the conditions of the research description outlined on the information form, they can sign). Information will be provided to the participants in accordance with the ‘General Requirements for Consent’ outlined in the NHMRC national Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research 2007.

Describe how you will deal with §2.2 and §2.3 of the National Statement regarding consent. If you request waiver of consent you must address NS §2.3. For a waiver, please also see the following section regarding the Privacy Act.

Privacy Act 1998, Sections §§95 and §§95A

If you do not have written consent AND you are requesting a waiver of consent to access Commonwealth or private-sector data, you will need to justify how the public interest value of your research relevant to public health or public safety out-weigh the public interest in the protection of privacy.

There are guidelines to assist you with this and you need to use them to make your case to the HREC.


Yes | No | *NS §2.2 - Do you need health data from Commonwealth agencies (§95)? |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>*NS §3.3 - Do you need health data from private-sector sources (§95A)?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

16. Will the research use deception, concealment or incomplete disclosure?

Yes | No | NS §2.3 discusses use of deception, covert observation, concealment, and incomplete disclosure: |

17. Will you make video, photograph, or audio recordings?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>NS §3.1 provides guidance on recording</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Address cultural issues if applicable. Ensure you explain storage of this material in your data management plan (above). Ensure you advise of this in your Participant Information and Consent forms.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I will ask permission from the participants to make audio recordings of the interviews, but this is optional and is not a requirement for participation in the study (this is reflected in the Participant Consent Form). They can decline to have the interview recorded and still participate in the research. There is no intention to make video recordings as part of this research project. The audio recordings are for the purpose of transcription and will contribute to a thematic analysis of the data. Verbatim quotes from my participants may be used in publications arising from the research but this will be made clear to them in the Participant Information Form.

18. Use of Qualitative Methods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>*See special considerations of qualitative methods in NS §3.1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>*Comments regarding NS §3.1:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* See the attachment for the survey which includes the interview questions. the surgery is presented both English and Chinese. The data generated from these methods will be thematically analysed using NVivo 11 software. Several pre-established themes will guide the initial coding exercise.

19. Use of data from data banks

Yes | No | *See special considerations of data banks in NS §3.2 |

20. Interventions, therapies, trials

Yes | No | *See special considerations of interventions, therapies, clinical and non-clinical trials in NS §3.3 |

21. Human Tissue

Yes | No | *See special considerations of tissue use in NS §3.4 |

22. Human Genetics

Yes | No | *See special considerations of genetics in NS §3.5 |

Specific details of interventions, therapies and trials

23. Are drugs, biological agents or therapeutic devices to be used?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>*NS §3.3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>*See the guidelines in NS §3.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: A Clinical Trials Notification (CTN) or Clinical Trial Exemption (CTX) from Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) will be required if this is a clinical trial.

24. Will invasive procedures be used?

Yes | No | NS §3.3 |

Yes | No | *NS §3.3 |
### 25. Will there be a placebo or non-treatment group?
- Yes [ ] No [ ]

### 26. Will (ionising) radiation be used?
- Yes [ ] No [ ]

#### Does the research focus on any of the following groups of people?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In the questions below the link NS §4.1 is to the relevant National Statement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27. Pregnant women, or Human ovum, embryo, or foetus. NS §4.1</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28. Children or young people ( ) NS §4.2</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29. Dependent or unequal relationships NS §4.3</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30. Highly dependent on medical care NS §4.4</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31. Cognitive impairment, intellectual disability, or mental illness NS §4.5</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32. Potential exposure of illegal activities NS §4.6</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33. Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander People</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34. Are any participants outside Australia? NS §4.8</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This project will be done in China.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Countries and approvals:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NS §4.8 Explain the ethical review process of the countries where overseas participants reside. Note: Australian and overseas ethics approval will probably be required.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35. Is there a potential conflict of interest? NS §5.4</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36 Other comments?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are there other issues you believe to be relevant to the ethical review of this research?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attachments Checklist - Please attach the following if applicable:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethics approval from non-UWA HREC</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full medical research protocol and/or Student Research proposal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recruitment material (e.g. advertisements, posters, flyers)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant Information Form (PIF)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant Consent Form (PCF)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional PIF and PCF for parent, teacher, school, as needed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questionnaire / survey instrument</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other docs (e.g. contracts, agreements, focus group docs, detailed procedure info)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Translations, where languages other than English are used above</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Related Approval &amp; supporting documents</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TGA CTN acknowledgement letter</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The following paragraph must be included in all Participant Information Form (PIF) and Participant Consent Form (PCF):

"Approval to conduct this research has been provided by the University of Western Australia, in accordance with its ethics review and approval procedures. Any person considering participation in this research project, or agreeing to participate, may raise any questions or issues with the researchers at any time.

In addition, any person not satisfied with the response of researchers may raise ethics issues or concerns, and may make any complaints about this research project by contacting the Human Ethics Office at the University of Western Australia on (08) 6488 3703 or by emailing to humanethics@uwa.edu.au

All research participants are entitled to retain a copy of any Participant Information Form and/or Participant Consent Form relating to this research project."

Chief Investigator or Supervisor of Higher Degree Research Student

I declare that:

- The information provided in this application is truthful and as complete as possible.
- I undertake to conduct the research in accordance with the approved protocol, the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research, 2007, relevant legislation and the policies and procedures of The University of Western Australia.
- Where I am the Project Supervisor for research described to be conducted by a student of The University of Western Australia, I declare that I have provided guidance to the student in the design, methodology and consideration of ethical issues of the proposed research; that the student has received the relevant research and ethics training for this project; and, that I will monitor the project during data collection.
- I make this application on the basis that the information it contains is confidential and will be used by The University of Western Australia for the purposes of ethical review and monitoring of the research project described herein, and to satisfy reporting requirements to regulatory bodies. The information will not be used for any other purpose without my prior consent.

☐ CI select
Our Ref: RA/4/20/1022

28 September 2018

Dr Darren Jorgensen
UWA Design School
MBDP: M433

Dear Doctor Jorgensen

HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS OFFICE – ETHICS APPROVAL RENEWED

Chinese Left Behind Children: An exhibition and thesis

Thank you for submitting your Progress Report for the above project. The report is satisfactory and ethics approval for the project has been renewed.

You will receive a request for your next progress report approximately one month before the next renewal date of 27 September 2019.

If you have any queries, please contact the Human Ethics office at humanethics@uwa.edu.au.

Please ensure that you quote the file reference – RA/4/20/1022 – and the associated project title in all future correspondence.

Yours sincerely

Mark Davies
Manager, Human Ethics

Name Faculty / School Role
Dr Darren Jorgensen UWA Design School Chief Investigator
Dr Ionat Zurr UWA Design School Co-Investigator

Student(s): Chengmei Xiang
“Well, Dorothy, you’re not in Kansas anymore!” Luise Guest reminds herself in Half the Sky, her book on Chinese women artists. She might well be writing about Australia’s very current dilemma of being forced to rethink its place in the world as China comes to dominate the economy and politics of East Asia. While politicians tread lightly around Chinese influence and the US alliance, certain quarters including the Australian media have been near hysterical about the decline of the Anglosphere, and the rise of a foreign power whose language and values are often at odds with their own. In the middle of this are the artists who work between China and Australia, who may as well be travelling between planets as between countries and cultures. For while these artists have, for the most part, adopted the liberal ideas of the contemporary artworld, in China they remain at risk of being censored and imprisoned. They cannot play out the fantasy of freedom and social mobility that Western artists entertain without putting themselves at significant risk.

Understanding Chinese–Australian artists has never been more important, as Australians try to grapple with the fundamental challenge to Australian identity that China presents. This challenge is nothing less than the triangulation of capitalism, democracy and freedom, ideas that China’s communist free-enterprise system proves need not go together. So it is that artists like Guo Jian have lived a double life since coming to Australia after being one of the hunger strikers in Tiananmen Square in 1989. Here he made his name painting in the style of the Chinese Political Pop movement, from his place of residence in Sydney. Drawing on his experience as a propaganda painter in the People’s Liberation Army, he made contemporary works that showed soldiers in dancing poses, mimicking the entertainment and propaganda he was subject to while being trained for a Chinese war with Vietnam. In the twenty-first century, he joined the boom of contemporary artists using the opportunities of a newly industrialised China to set up a studio in Beijing, and shift into installation and sculpture.

It was amidst this new atmosphere for making big, contemporary works that Guo conceived of a diorama of Tiananmen Square out of building rubble. He went on to cover it in pork mince, reflecting his own experience of carrying bodies from the site of the massacre in 1989. As an extraordinary sign of his life to come, that day he was wearing a T-Shirt featuring an Australian Aboriginal design.

The Square is one of many works about Chinese social issues that have been part of the twenty-first century boom in contemporary art in China. Fuelled by collectors both inside and outside the country, the boom has enabled younger artists to join older artists like Guo in questioning the place of China in a world of liberal ideas and global capital.
Guo Jian
The Square, 2014
pork mince, mixed media.
Courtesy and © Guo Jian
Guo’s *The Square* (2014) was bound to attract the Chinese government’s attention, in a country where even the number 89 alerts its online censors. He was imprisoned and then deported after making the work, not to be allowed back in the country for five years. The Australian embassy pleaded his case, as it has for other people living between the countries who have found themselves under arrest in China. Without the right to live in Australia, Guo may well have been imprisoned for longer than two weeks in Beijing. Other artists without the security of residence elsewhere tend to code their work more ambivalently in order not to attract attention. Ai Song’s model of Tiananmen is made of barbed wire, analogising totalitarianism, but it is called *Castle* (2011) and has escaped censorship. *Castle* sits within an *œuvre* of barbed wire sculpture, in which Ai has crafted everything from tanks to human figures climbing fences. The image of Beijing’s power is at once everywhere and nowhere in his work, alluding to the impenetrability of the regime without naming it.

The tension plays itself out in what art critic Wang Lin calls the “Two Chinas,” one that is censored and policed and another that exists beyond its borders on the Anglophone internet. Middle class Chinese can see beyond their censored online world with VPNs (Virtual Private Networks). This enables them to see all the more clearly the ways in which information is controlled and the media is propaganda within China. This control is pervasive, such that those without VPNs, and those who have grown up knowing nothing else, simply do not know that there was a Tiananmen Square Massacre, or that Taiwan does not regard itself as a part of China. These words, and those of the Dalai Lama and Falun Gong, will almost certainly lead to this publication’s website being blocked in China (for the same reason, the website of Australian art critic John McDonald is censored in China).

Online, these terms not only attract censors, but may well alert the police.

Of course, the most famous artist who works between the two Chinas is Ai Weiwei. His recent works at the 2018 Biennale of Sydney, including a giant blown up refugee boat, *Law of the Journey*, 2017, and a film about the global refugee crisis, *Human Flow* (2017), carry on a deliberate program of political work that dates back to the 1980s, when he was part of what has become known as the Chinese avant-garde. Ai is now something of a stand-in for Chinese dissent in the world’s media, and his production values have grown with it. There is no denying the scale of his operations. Even his work for the Biennale of Sydney at Cockatoo Island featured a viewing platform to maximise photo opportunities. Ai’s celebrity status is such that he plays himself in his
**Ai Weiwei**
Stills from Human Flow, 2017
A Participant Media and Amazon Studios release.
Courtesy of Amazon Studios

Opposite:
**Ai Song**
Castle, 2011
barbed wire.
Courtesy and © Ai Song
film *Human Flow* (2017). No longer just the provocateur, he appears in the refugee hot spots around the world alongside aid workers as just a regular guy. But by dropping into refugee zones, Ai makes an implicit comparison between his own situation in China and that of people fleeing conflict and deprivation. Again, there are two worlds at work here, one in which Ai is able to step out of that persecuted situation and into the wider world, and one in which people are trapped, as stateless DPs with their life on hold indefinitely. More crucially perhaps for China, Guo and Ai have attracted the attention of the Chinese Communist Party by giving form to their dissent in works about highly sensitive issues, such as Tiananmen Square. In Ai’s case, it was work about the Sichuan earthquake that brought the Chinese government to bear upon him and his art. The earthquake killed thousands of children who had been inside badly constructed school buildings, due to the corrupt relations between government officials and contractors.

Again, it is possible to compare this kind of work with that of other Chinese artists who foster circumspection and address social issues. Wang Qingsong is the most successful artist photographer in China. He stages photographs that address the complexity and stresses of living amidst highly paced economic growth and its collision with everyday life. The inspiration for *Follow You* (2013) was a news report about a student on a medical drip taking an entrance examination for university. Wang bought twenty tons of books and staged more than a hundred students sleeping in the classroom while playing the student patient himself. On the back of the wall are posters of encouragement that resemble the slogans of the Communist Party, such as “Study well, progress everyday” (好好学习，天天向上), and “For sustained development, education is crucial” (百年之计，教育为本). The question marks he has placed after these slogans make it clear that Wang is being cynical about such propaganda, as the importance of having higher degrees put great deal of pressure on students and families in China. Australia profits from this anxiety, as its universities sell degrees to Chinese students, whose families go to great expense to send their children here.

The frustration of those living within China lies in the magnitude of such issues, that affect hundreds of millions of families, and the seeming inability or unwillingness of the government to address them. While the situation makes artists like Ai and Guo appear heroic, the reality of censorship in China is often more banal. A recent example is the 2018 exhibition *Wild Field* (旷野) in Shijazhuang, that was shut down after twenty days. A high-profile show in China, attracting media attention, it focused on issues taking place in the Chinese countryside. It also featured several artists who were part of the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989, including Yan Zhengxue, Wang Peng, and the Gao Brothers.

A banned exhibition is often labelled dangerous or illegal to the public, but there are rarely any written directives to shut down. Instead, local police simply brief organisers. The curators of *Wild Field* had already attempted to negotiate with the local cultural department responsible for censorship. Officials visited several times, in a protracted negotiation over what and how works were to be censored, through China’s four conditions for art exhibitions:

1. No works contradicting the ruling party’s four cardinal principles are permitted. The works need to:
   (1) Uphold the socialist path;
   (2) Uphold the dictatorship of the proletariat;
   (3) Uphold the leadership of the Communist Party; and
   (4) Uphold Marxist-Leninist and Maoist thought.

2. Pornographic and obscene works are prohibited.

3. Performance art is prohibited. The regulations are blurry when it comes to social issues, since even raising some of these issues can be interpreted as criticism of the Chinese Communist Party. In his introduction to Chinese contemporary art, Paul Gladston writes of another censored show, “Any threat to its staging was ultimately not inscribed precisely
in law but was instead a matter of bureaucratic interpretation as well as an associated fear of loss of face with regard to the maintenance of public order.” In other words, censorship is here as much about administrative overreach as it is about maintaining state power.

So it was that in *Wild Field*, Wang Peng’s *Ruin* (2010) and *Grove Monument* (2014) attracted the attention of the censors, as they counter-memorialised the aborted 400 million foetuses resulting from the One Child Policy. This was mainly directed at Han couples, who after 1978 were only allowed to have one child if the couple were residing in the countryside. This rule applied unless they had a girl who had reached seven years of age, in which case the couple were permitted to have another child. The One Child Policy was brutal, cruel and bloody. If the authorities discovered a pregnant woman who already had one or more children the government forced her to have an abortion, no matter what stage of the pregnancy, and had her permanently sterilised. The most cruel moment in the history of the One Child Policy was probably Zeng Zhaoqi’s “No children within 100 days (白日无孩运动)” policy, that is also known as the “Lambs Massacre.” This took place in the Guan and Shen counties of ShanDong province in 1991. No children were allowed to be born for 100 days (from 1 May to 10 August) and during that period any child, whether first or second in the family, was to be aborted.

After some negotiation, Wang’s works were permitted but had to change their name to *Life*. The work originally named *Grove Monument* also had to be covered in fabric, because it was carved with the impacting words, “the spiritual monument of the children who died from the One Child Policy.” On the opening day of the exhibition the officials went one step further, forcing the gallery to remove the monument, leaving just the base. *Ruin*, a series of photographs of aborted foetuses left on rubbish dumps, were also removed and replaced by colourful scenery. While the Western artworld has become jaded with political art, incorporating risk into its own modes of art consumption, Chinese artists are working in a very different situation. Wang, one of the student protestors at Tiananmen Square, made these works because he had seen foetuses in a hospital rubbish bin during the time of the One Child Policy. His artist’s statement gives some sense of the mood with which many Chinese artists make work: “During the enforcement of 37 years One Child Policy, the distorted system has revealed the cruelty and ignorance of humanity, plus the long-term brain-washing education that make me feel nihilistic to life. The nihilistic feeling made me question the meaning of lives.”

Artists are not alone in questioning the current state of Chinese society. *WeChat* is frequently full of conversations about terrible things that have happened in China, as if such events can gauge the mood of the country today. There are stories of children being repeatedly run over in traffic, or suicides in which
Wang Peng
Ruin 1 and Ruin 1, 2010
Courtesy and © Wang Peng

Opposite:
Wang Peng
Progressive views of The Monument, 2014
mixed media.
Courtesy and © Wang Peng
people are encouraged to jump from buildings, reflecting widespread concern that China has become a shallow, consumerist society.

It is in this context that artists find that their work matters, more so than we can admit in the West. As Wang says after visiting the US: “But it was interesting that in America you had all the freedom you could want but nothing you did could provoke as much attention as in China. Here you might always worry that the police will come and get you. But in America no one even noticed what you were doing. Then you just felt more depressed …”

So it is that even obtusely political works, like Wang Yongsheng’s paintings in Wild Field, may well attract official interest. The Spiritual Conclusion of the Anxious Conjunction between Urban and Rural (2017) shows a giant fly looming over a crowd of people. Wang is reflecting on socialism in China, here showing a compressed atmosphere. Again, negotiation with the censors meant that these paintings were censored, albeit in an absurd way. On the day of the opening, the gallery pasted some cartoon-like images, painted by the producer Liu Heyin, to cover the heads in order to pass the inspection. The visibility of censorship is the very opposite of what we might expect in Australia, where for years films were simply cut at the whim of the censorship board, making it difficult to see what in fact had been removed. It may not even have been the subject of Wang’s work that attracted the censors, but its style. Expressionism has long been associated with capitalism in China, as opposed to Socialist Realism. It may also have been Wang’s identity that alarmed the local authorities, since although he is Han, Wang grew up with the Uygur minority in XinJiang province, a minority that has been active in its protests against Beijing’s authority. The ambiguities around censorship, the way that “the rules aren’t set in stone,” as Wang says, creates both a despairing mood among artists, but also a feeling for making work that grasps the possibility of freedom.

Other works in Wild Field addressed issues in rural China. One of the authors of this essay (Tami Xiang), showed portraits of a handful of the sixty million “Left Behind Children,” subject to the restrictions of the system of Household Registration (HuKou)2 and separated from their parents who have gone to the cities to work, often leaving them in the care of a generation of Mao-era grandparents. Guo Xiaojun also presented 18,000 photographs from the internet depicting the misery of life in the countryside, without access to social services. We see the houses of farmers being forcibly dismantled, children
Various views of
**Guo Xiaojun**
*Settled Down, 2016*
Compilation photographs. Courtesy and © Guo Xiaojun

Opposite:
Before and after views of
**Wang Yongsheng**
The Spiritual Conclusion of the Anxious Conjunction between Urban and Rural, 2017 oil painting. Courtesy the artist
Above and opposite:
Li Xinmo
Two views of The Death of the Xinxi River, 2008 photographs from the performance.
Courtesy and © Li Xinmo
selling themselves to raise money to cure their parents’ illness and so on. A collage of these photographs constructs another, large image called *Settled Down in a Prosperous and Contented Life* (2018) that mimics the traditional front wall of a rural house. These walls typically paint plum blossoms, orchids, bamboo and chrysanthemum on such walls, symbolising the traditional national characteristics of pride, politeness, modesty, and honesty. The disparity is between the farmers’ dream and their reality.

At the opening of this exhibition, *Settled Down in a Prosperous and Contented Life* was not allowed to be shown. The curators pasted a curtain over the wall, with a DO NOT TOUCH sign to ensure people were unable to see the details that made up the composite image, undermining the idyllic charade. Meanwhile, gallery staff projected something beautiful onto the curtain to disguise its real content. Despite this hundreds of people attended the opening and some looked behind the curtain, arousing discussion on the censorship of the work. Invariably, this irritated the local authorities, who ordered the gallery to seal the curtain with sticks and nails so that it could no longer be viewed.

In a Western or perhaps any other context, to make such censorship visible with curtains and other distracting signposts appears ridiculous, since it makes visible the very power that the works are critiquing. Certainly, this would have been the curatorial gamble, to illustrate the very constraints surrounding freedom of expression. In Guo’s case, the impact of censorship was multiplied, first by the curtain and then by the projection. Already mimicking the strategies of the government in his paradox of a beautiful picture composed of details that revealed real-world misery, Guo found his work’s doubled again by foreclosure.

Alongside the banality of censorship lies this relentless misery of life under a regime that is becoming increasingly authoritarian. It is worth noting that this trend is also taking place in Anglophone countries, which are broadening anti-terrorist legislation to cover protesters and whistleblowers (in Australia and the UK), and using terrorism as a reason for policing borders (Australia, the UK and the US). While censorship was traditionally relegated to moral issues in the Anglophone, it has become increasingly political, as in China.

While the issue of censorship in China is a familiar one for readers of Western commentary, we read perhaps less about what is a more intractable problem there. This is the problem of patriarchy. As freedom was never part of China's internal conversation, nor was feminism. Arguably, patriarchal culture has been governed by authoritarianism for centuries, and is rooted in the dynasties that ruled China until the early 20th century. The artworld reflects this situation. Tami Xiang was one of only three women of 52 artists featured in the *Wild Field* exhibition. There has been no feminist movement in China, and yet as Guest notes there has been a history of transformation that is particular to Chinese women in the 20th and 21st centuries: “From food-bound 8/9 ‘little lotus’ to the Modernist ‘xin núxing’ (new woman), from revolutionary heroine to contemporary ‘factory girl’ operating in the global economy, Chinese women have experienced radical change in three generations. It would be facile to expect that theories of gender would follow the same trajectory as in the West.”

One area that women have been more visible is in performance art. In spite of the government's no performance art rule, there are now performance artists and even performance art festivals in China. Many of these works address issues that affect Chinese people without stepping so far as to directly critique the government. Submerging herself in a highly polluted Chinese river, set out to highlight the deterioration not only of the river but of Chinese society,
Li Xinmo simulated the recent murder of an art student whose corpse was dumped in the river. The destruction of the environment and the murder of this young woman are aligned in Li’s performance that is paradoxically beautiful, as she is covered by an algae bloom likely caused by phosphorous running into the water from farms. The triangulation of murder, pollution and beauty points once more to a melancholy consideration of the Chinese state and society.

Works of art that alert us to the national issues of China enable a greater understanding of the difference of this vast, crowded country, and the ways in which Chinese people see themselves. Alongside the many introductory books and essays published in Australia, the cultural sensitivities for government and corporate workers and the courses in WeChat, the visual arts play a role in framing who the Chinese are. But it is important to note that artists undertaking social practices are a minority in their own country. Most Chinese artists are engaged in making traditional kinds of art, studying calligraphy, landscape and stamp making at the thousands of art schools across the country. Collectors and galleries within China are largely interested in a traditional aesthetic, assessing students with criteria achieved only by dedicated years of studying and building skills. Teachers at art schools are treated like gods, patriarchs responsible for the transmission of tradition.

In this context, what in Australia counts as contemporary art is barely seen and little understood. Innovation takes place within traditional genres, bending and extending the rules that Chinese artists have learned make up aesthetic quality. This is the kind of work we see in the current Sydney shows of Sun Xun, with his giant drawings, prints and woodcuts that sometimes glow in the dark (as in the work commissioned for the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney), rolled out like a classical scroll, drawing from tradition, and expanded into 3D form as animations in perpetual motion. His print and screen-based works on exhibition at the MCA and White Rabbit Gallery, with their archetypal mythological themes driving the narrative, bring to mind Walter Benjamin’s Angel of History, propelled forward with its back to the future while looking at the ruins of the past. Just so, Gladston reports on the way that within China, such work might be seen as part of a shift to “exceed Westernisation by rediscovering ‘the resources of our traditional national spirit.’”

Sun, whose graphic mark-making, layered post-historical and post-industrial landscapes (buoyed by the relationship to Soviet era European art) is a good example of how these traditions of art practice are subverted from within, and are now part of an ongoing struggle over the meaning of Chinese modernity, and the place of national identity within a highly industrialised but undemocratic country. Artists concerned to forefront social issues struggle not only with the restrictions of their government, but also with the ongoing legacies of a traditional education in Chinese art, and a mainstream that remains tied to practices that are as culturally restrictive as they are politically conservative.

1 Laine Guest, Half the Sky, Piper Press, Sydney, 2016, p. 222
3 See Elizabeth Fortescue, “I remember the blood stain on my aboriginal T-shirt: Artist recalls the horror of Tiananmen Square.” The Daily Telegraph, 4 March 2017
4 For another case in which being resident in Australia has aided release, see the interview with Feng Chongyi in 4 Corners, Power and Influence episode, ABC TV, 5 June 2017.
6 Wild Field, curated by Liu Heyin, opened 27 May 2018 at NUIC Art Space. Shijiazhuang.
7 The four conditions are quoted in Wen-Chu Wang Censorship and subtle subversion in Chinese contemporary art, 2013. Master’s Degree
Darren Jorgensen is Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Architecture, Landscape and Visual Arts at the University of Western Australia.

Tami Xiang is a Chinese-Australia contemporary artist, her work has been published in the New York Times and has been exhibited in mainland China, France, the United States, Taiwan and Australia. She is currently undertaking a Master of Fine Arts by research at the University of Western Australia.

Top: 
Sun Xun
Mythological Time, 2017
Still from two-channel animation HD video, sound.

Bottom: 
Sun Xun
Heterodoxy III, 2017
Courtesy the artist and Edouard Malingue Gallery. © the artist