Tiananmen and Censorship in China

Any book about China at present runs the risk of being commandeered by the latent, impending Cold War between China and the United States; an analysis of the former’s political system that highlights its shortcomings in the matter of human rights, freedoms, corruption, et cetera cannot avoid being grist for the mill of the American propaganda machine. Censorship is common to all regimes, whether authoritarian or ostensibly democratic, in one form or another; in the United States, as well as the justified banning of certain forms of pornography and racist discourse, one thinks of the recent political interventions into what can and cannot be taught in the university. But in the case of a one-party regime, the use of censorship is synonymous with repression. Anything less than outright denunciation is seen as apologetic.

Thomas Chen is only too aware of this dilemma: “I am cognizant that Oriental censorship is a popular product in the West, where I am. Tales of Chinese repression, the literary genre to which this book appears to belong, find a receptive audience here, especially in terms of political repression.... [However,] if [my Chinese colleagues] cannot tackle this project, and I put it off too, then are we resigning ourselves to the censorship regime, which involves not just articles being taken down, paragraphs removed, or the banning of books and films, but also the redaction of history, the tailoring of memory, the molding of the public?” (p. 175).

The result is a nuanced approach to the subject, which is to be welcomed. In no way is censorship seen as being essentially limited to so-called communist regimes, still less to their “orientalist” versions. Chen cites Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* (1975)—regrettably an undertheorized reference here—for rethinking power (and censorship) as both repression and production, paving the way for the “constitutive censorship” scholars who have challenged the assignation of censors
(the state, the church, etc.) to one side and artists (writers, filmmakers, etc.) to the other. As the author points out, constitutive censorship originates as a reaction to the neoliberal revolution begun in the capitalist West in the 1970s, which saw nation-states recede behind transnational corporations and the free market as “administrators of discourse”; “such scholarship is a welcome corrective to Western media portrayals that, influenced by holdover Cold War ideology of the totalitarian other, hype the idea of Oriental despotism” (p. 3).

This said, the application of the constitutive censorship approach to China presents problems of its own. The decision to limit the analysis to the violent repression of the student demonstrators in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square not only highlights state (rather than corporate) censorship, but also centers on an event arguably more commemorated in the West than remembered in China itself. As the author admits, the emphasis in contemporary China studies has shifted to China’s integration into global capitalism, wherein the 1989 movement is seen as a momentary exception to the general trumping of the political by the economic. In this respect, many scholars identify the deepening of market reforms in 1992 as a more important marker, even in the domain of culture. Chen’s book is therefore an intervention within China studies that reemphasizes the political dimension of everyday life through reactions to Tiananmen from within China, a litmus test for seeing censorship as a total project encompassing both prescription and propagation.

First, the very term “censorship” is deconstructed. The equivalent in Chinese, shencha, signifies “inspection” and “examination”; censorship also includes what is “examined” and allowed, including party propaganda. As Chen writes, “in China, censorship as a function cuts across various state institutions. The government does not see denial/deletion as one thing and publicity/propaganda as another, but rather it sees both as parts of a whole” (p. 5). The regulations of the Cyberspace Administration of China, effective since March 2020, begin with contents to be “encouraged” (the “thought” of Xi Jinping, the platform policies of the Chinese Communist Party [CCP], etc.). A second category includes contents to be precluded (threats to national security, superstitions, cults, pornography, excessive violence), while a third category pertains to contents to be resisted (vulgarity, clickbait, “improper” commentaries on natural disasters, discrimination).

For Chen, this conflation of the political and the moral is what makes censorship in contemporary China particular. Some sort of balance between the two is endemic to all censorship regimes, but in China, the bottom line is politics, tactically in the name of ethics, sometimes assimilated to “Chinese or Asian values”: the ostensible target is perversion, while the latent target is subversion.[1] This political bottom line is not absolute: some events (the Cultural Revolution) or policies (corruption, censorship itself) can now be evoked openly. The repression of the Tiananmen movement is therefore chosen by Chen as a litmus test, the ultimate example of a political event that cannot be debated in China.

The first chapter treats the state propaganda campaign in the immediate aftermath of Tiananmen. For Chen, this coordinated campaign in text and image in which the repression of the demonstrators is explicitly evoked should not be seen as the opposite of censorship, but as a crucial dimension of censorship itself. The heavy-handed, imperative approach to propaganda was relatively limited; more important was a pedagogical, didactic approach aimed at enlightening students as to the correct manner of interpreting the events. Given the impossibility of purging millions of demonstrators and sympathizers, the Chinese state turned for ideological guidance to the famous essay by Mao, “On the Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People” (1957), which argues for the distinction between antagonistic and nonantagonistic contradictions. In practice,
this means distinguishing between a small number of “plotters and provokers” (to be punished severely), and a social group, in this case students, temporarily led astray.

The second chapter uses three case studies—two films and a novel—to illustrate “workarounds” in which the Tiananmen movement is not mentioned, but rather alluded to indirectly; the references to Tiananmen emerge only through the intricate interpretation of the author, who sets out the contents of each work in some detail. Belying the book’s title, none of these works involved official censorship, although the novel Death Fugue was rejected by a dozen publishers before being published in a small-circulation literary journal. The two films reviewed were shot without authorization, independently, although I Graduated benefited from equipment borrowed from the state television network CCTV. The status of these films is uncertain, and the author does not say how he had access to them; although they have never been shown in cinema or on television, they do circulate “in limited circles, with screenings in small venues advertised in online bulletins” (p. 96). As for Death Fugue, not distributed as a book in mainland China, it was sufficiently well known in literary and academic circles to be recommended by one of the author’s professors. What is being described here is the existence of a counterculture, or underground in China—surely to be welcomed, generally (albeit not totally) tolerated by the authorities; screenings of independent films, poetry readings, concerts by punk rock groups take place informally in a manner not unlike such events in the West. Internet sites largely circumscribe state censorship: for example, episodes of popular American series are generally available with Chinese subtitles the day after their American broadcast, although these sites are sometimes targeted by the authorities.

Chapter 3 discusses two films that foreground romantic relationships: Lan Yu (2001) and Summer Palace (2006). In the former, directed by Hong Kong director Stanley Kwan, the love story is between two men, against the background of Tiananmen, indirectly mentioned by a reference to a strike that has already lasted several weeks. The film is set on June 3, 1989, the day before the army opened fire on the student demonstrators, but this has no incidence on the foregrounded gay romance. Shot in China without official approval but with tacit permission and briefly screened on the mainland, Lan Yu exhibits, admits Chen, many of the characteristics of the underground film discussed in chapter 2. The link to Tiananmen also comes in a sequence in which the two protagonists sing “The Internationale,” one of the most popular songs sung by the student demonstrators during the spring of 1989. Summer Palace (2006), directed by Lou Ye, is about a tempestuous romance between two students. On the night of June 3, the girl learns that her lover slept with her best friend. The film, which contains graphic sex scenes, also includes fleeting glimpses of Tiananmen Square shot at a distance from taxicabs. The film was not released in China for reasons of “picture and sound quality,” but was premiered at the Cannes Film Festival without permission. For this act of insubordination, the director was banned from film work in China for five years.

Chapter 4 restitutes an article by the author published in a Chinese literary journal in which censored material is restored in brackets in “an orthography of censorship” (p. 134). The article itself speaks of a banned book, subsequently unbanned, Ruined City by Jia Pingwa. The original version, published in 1993 and withdrawn from circulation because of its “pornographic descriptions,” infamously contains blank squares (ellipsed content in Chinese punctuation equivalent to three dots) representing parts of the manuscript deleted before publication. The unbanned version, published in 2009, replaces the blank squares with ellipses; in the meantime, Jia Pingwa had received a prestigious literary prize for another novel. In Chen’s essay, all references, direct or indirect, to
the Tiananmen demonstrations were systematically expunged.

“When one thinks of Chinese censorship and the internet,” writes Chen, “one most likely conjures the Great Firewall that keeps websites like YouTube, Facebook and Twitter out.... I take a different approach. Instead of looking at what censorship wipes out and how it does so, I examine what the combination of Chinese censorship and the internet produces” (p. 150). The author adopts this approach to the novel by Hu Fayun, Such is this World@sars.come, published online in 2004, before being published in book form in 2006. In 2009, a blogger named Shi Ya Wu Tian republished an online version that restored the material deleted from the book (references to the SARS virus and to Tiananmen). His posts were subsequently deleted and redeleted by the authorities, but posted and reposted on other sites in a cat-and-mouse game, before the authorities relented. Hu Fayan went on to give a series of lectures on the Cultural Revolution at Wuhan University whose transcripts were posted on his blog. The eleventh lecture, apparently too sensitive, was repeatedly deleted, even when reposted elsewhere.

In his conclusion, Chen contends that one day Tiananmen may be unfrozen, “quietly, without much fanfare” (p. 172). Such an “unfreezing” already applies (within certain limits) to the Great Leap Forward and to the Cultural Revolution, both political and economic disasters. Chen discusses one timid step in this direction regarding Tiananmen: a blog post from overseas Chinese students in May 2015 sought to tell the “truth” about the 1989 movement from sources gleaned in the West. In reaction, an editorial from the party tabloid Global Times predictably assimilated the Chinese students abroad to ignorant foreigners, an alien “minority within a minority,” but less predictably, argued that it is those who were at Tiananmen Square in 1989 who have the right to pass judgment, and that society itself “understands with sympathy” how Tiananmen has been “downplayed” (quoted, p. 170). The editorial was subsequently removed from the Global Times website. A year later, in May 2016, the tabloid again published an editorial on another subject of contention with Western media in which Tiananmen is referred to the “democracy movement” in quotation marks, which has been “quietly washed away by the waves of history” (quoted, p. 171). Again, the editorial was later removed from the website.

How is one to evaluate this book, especially when one is not a specialist of Chinese literature and film, dissident or otherwise, all the more so in the absence of direct knowledge of the works discussed, most of which are probably difficult if not impossible to access, especially for someone with no Chinese? Specialists will have their own point of view, but the treatment by some individual works by Chen could conceivably be seen as narrow when the prism of Tiananmen is at best fleeting and tangential, and when other issues (homosexuality, sexual freedom, etc.) are more explicitly foregrounded. Tiananmen serves then as a loose thread for grouping a rather disparate corpus of films and novels, which are otherwise not representative of anything in particular. It must be said that the focus of Chen is on literary analysis, and that his nuanced account of the tribulations of individual works precludes any general account of censorship in modern-day China from a historical perspective; in this sense, every banned, unbanned, and partially banned work, book, or film has a right to its own nuanced analysis, welcome on one level, but limiting on others. Hence, the political dimension is “absent-present” throughout, never really developed after a first chapter dealing with the brief, propaganda-laden aftermath of Tiananmen. As someone with a strong (but nonprofessional) interest in China, I would like to raise the following points in the light of Chen’s research, which is stimulating in ways he may not have intended.
1. Is the Tiananmen massacre necessarily the best example for treating the censorship (total or partial) of individual works in China insofar as it is a cut-and-dried case: any reference, even glancing, is forbidden and invites automatic censorship (as are references to repression in Tibet or in Xinjiang)? Presumably, the “spirit of Tiananmen” survives as a ghostly presence in debates on liberal reforms in intellectual circles without being explicit or even indirectly alluded to. In other words, the Tiananmen reference is not conducive to nuanced analysis for there is no grey area in which it can be represented; such a grey area does, however, exist in debates over political and economic corruption, the Cultural Revolution, the Great Leap Forward, economic liberalism and its consequences, et cetera. For example, in Liu Cixin’s 2008 best-selling *The Three Body Problem* (faithfully adapted in a 30-part series by CCTV, the state television network), the brutal murder of a respected, world-famous physicist by fanatical, ignorant Red Guards, “crazier than crazy,” has truly cosmic consequences.

2. The lack of a sustained political dimension can give the impression of a monolithic one-party state opposed to political debate. In reality, the Chinese authorities (and the Communist Party) were deeply divided in 1989 between those in favor of accelerating political and economic reforms, and those in favor of a return to state control of the economy, especially following the rise of inflation and unemployment in the wake of the liberalization of prices in the 1980s that had led to widespread discontent and unrest. This division was also reproduced throughout society, generally opposing workers (opposed to liberalization) and intellectuals (in favor). The debate also turned on whether economic liberalism necessarily implied political liberalism, and whether the political form of a one-party state was compatible with an increasingly important private sector. In 1987, Zhao Ziyang, a convinced advocate of reform, became secretary-general of the party. By 1989, a relatively open political climate, encouraged by Zhao’s faction, saw demands by students and teachers for the “fifth modernization” (democracy, free association, and multipartyism), influenced by the glasnost policies of Mikhail Gorbachev, who had recently visited China. Demonstrations and hunger strikes in Tiananmen Square led to protests in over four hundred cities. The reformist faction favored a negotiated and pacific end to the unrest, while the conservative faction, rallied by Deng Xiaoping, the historical initiator of economic reforms, prevailed and declared martial law on the 19th of May. Zhao was immediately relieved of his position after giving an empathetic speech to the students gathered in Tiananmen Square. On the 4th of June, a tank division of the army, lacking in anti-riot equipment (tear gas, etc.), occupied the square and fired on the unarmed students. Estimates of the number of deaths in Beijing range from the hundreds to the thousands.

This deep division, both within the Communist Party and within Chinese society as a whole, between reform and reaction, between openness to the West and retreat to “Chinese values,” continues to this day and explains a zigzaggy, unpredictable censorship policy that bans and then unbans, that allows certain American series to be broadcast or streamed and then suddenly removes them, that tolerates dissident internet sites and then suppresses them.[2] The problem of the right balance of economic and political liberalism in China has yet to be resolved.

Any consideration of censorship in China must then take into account the ever-shifting weight of the various factions within the Communist Party, which governs not only what is forbidden but what is unexpectedly allowed. For example, *The Pitfalls of Modernization*, by the journalist He Qianling, first published in Hong Kong in 1997, was republished in Beijing in 1998 with a preface by Liu Ji, vice-president of the Academy of Social Sciences, and sold over two hundred thousand copies legally. The book violently attacked the party’s “robber barons” who had profited from
privatization reforms to spoliate state assets; it also denounced the reappearance of clans in Guangdong and Fujian provinces, responsible for generalized corruption following the reform of ground rents. He Qianling assimilated the selling of public land by local authorities to the enclosures put in place by the English bourgeoisie in the eighteenth century. This type of intervention, politically guided, highlights one of the contradictions of the Tiananmen movement: the pursuit of economic reforms went hand in hand with widespread, naked corruption. Greater transparency in the distribution of wealth was one of the demands of the student demonstrators.

3. The Tiananmen massacre in which, under orders, the army fired on student demonstrators, was a cynical, brutal abuse of power that has left an indelible stain on the reputation of the People's Republic, on the ruling Communist Party, and more specifically on that of the legacy of Deng Xiaoping. An indelible stain also for the Chinese people. The party line, reiterated by president Hu Jintao during a visit to France in 2004 and which continues to this day, is that it was necessary to “act with determination” to restore order, to stabilize economic development, and to protect socialism; Deng Xiaoping went so far as to declare that a small number of rioters, for the most part habitual criminals and discontented layabouts (and not students), had attacked the soldiers, who were then forced to defend themselves; furthermore, there were no deaths in Tiananmen Square. How many party members, at the summit or at the base, really believed this, especially as the two statements of authority are more than a little contradictory? It would be interesting to apply the close reading practiced by Chen, not to a corpus of films and novels, but to selective official declarations and articles by journalists; in a “symptomatic reading” the repressed truth resurfaces not only in linguistic slips but also in more subtle “symptoms” that ruffle the smooth prose of the party line: an incongruous word, an inexplicable grammatical error, a clumsy or illogical link between sentences, a forced cliché, a botched metaphor, compulsive repetition, all “micro-incidents” susceptible to interpretation that potentially exposes hesitations, half-confessions, regrets, and muffled shame. The editorial of the party tabloid Global Times quoted by Chen (see above) is one such example: there is no logical connection between saying that only those who were present in Tiananmen have “the right to judge” (not present-day overseas students, but why not, given their access to the truth, repressed in China itself?), and later that the “democratic movement has been quietly washed away by the waves of history.” The latter statement is pure wish-fulfillment, a desire that the whole affair “quietly” disappear as if it had never happened; the former is a recognition that those present (but no one else, who must close their eyes) have the right to consider themselves victims of a crime committed by the state, in an act of aggression against its own citizens. This truth remains repressed, but that which is repressed always comes to the surface, traumatically or in an act of healing, long overdue.

4. In the spirit of Chen’s chapter 4, in which one of the author’s articles in English is translated into Chinese in a different, censored, version, it would be interesting to expand this type of analysis (comparison of English and Chinese versions) to other works of interest. Several of Fredric Jameson’s books have been published in Chinese versions; How do these compare to the originals? How does Adorno, notoriously difficult to render in other languages, translate into Chinese? Freud? Marx? Keynes? As the adage goes, all translation is a form of treason, but in a sensitive political environment, this treason may involve subtle changes of vocabulary, missing sentences, or paragraphs for political reasons. Such a project remains to be carried out.

Notes

[1.] For example, the American TV series Game of Thrones was shown on a subscription platform of CCTV, the state television network in
China, in a version pre-censored by the show’s producers (scenes of excessive violence and sex) for screening in Singapore.

[2]. For example, the American series The Big Bang Theory, The Good Wife, NCIS, and The Practice were suddenly banned from legal streaming platforms in 2014, no reason being given.


[4]. A similar event took place in Mexico City in 1968 when the army opened fire on peaceful student demonstrators, leaving between three hundred and four hundred dead. It could be argued that, in its wake, the Mexican body politic has never really recovered from the discredit attached to its institutions of government.


[6]. Such a project also extends to translations of Chinese works into English. One example: the English translation of Liu Cixin’s The Three Body Problem begins with the dramatic sequence of the Cultural Revolution, whereas in the Chinese version, it occurs many chapters later. Was this the original intention of Liu Cixin (to placate the Chinese authorities), or that of the American editor for political or commercial reasons (or both)?

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