

The Impact of Censorship on a Personal Level and the Need for Cross-Cultural Collaboration in Free Speech Activism

Growing up, I dreamed of becoming a writer, but this is probably never going to happen.

As a Chinese language writer, I learned to self-censor the first time I presented my work to a broader audience. Publishing my occasional writings online, I was cautious not to write about any physical interactions of romantic couples which take place “below the necks,” since it would make the chapter more likely to get blocked for sexual implications, even if I did not mean it that way. I used slashes between each Chinese character of a potentially politically sensitive word, like “subvert” 颠覆 or “turmoil” 动乱 to dodge the censorship algorithm. When I wrote a diary-style story, I ensured nothing happened in my story during June 1989 since I knew it would not get through the website’s review board due to what actually happened in Tiananmen Square. Last but not the least, I made all my protagonists apolitical.

On the scratch papers hidden in my drawers, where my writings are only visible to myself, my characters take bolder actions, connect to each other politically, and are shaped by the political realities they face. My characters turn evil not because they are inherently irredeemable but because this is the only way they can survive in a systemically unjust society. They reflect on the validity of the values they have uncritically believed in since birth and thus feel a strong identity crisis, just as I felt as a teenager. When I typed up my drafts on my computer, I carefully trimmed off these “radical” plots and covered my characters with harmless sugarcoats. Only in this way could I let more people know about them and their adventures.

In 2018, I finally decided to stop self-censoring, even though this decision might cost me my dream of becoming a proud Chinese-language writer. That year I found out that two-thirds of the chapters from the work I was most proud of, the one that I tried so hard to self-censor before putting online, had been blocked due to the “violation of certain rules” as the Cyberspace Administration of China strengthens its control over online literature. Reading through the fragmented story was like holding the amputated limbs of my beloved child. It was at that point I realized that self-censorship is not the way creators will gain more spaces of expression: the more we compromise under the censorship, the faster our freedom of expression shrinks. The formerly legal expression will ultimately become illegal. The confining environment will obliterate our creativity and flatten our characters. Being afflicted by the censorship on a very personal level, I read through the manuscripts buried deep down in my drawer, envisioning an environment where I could fearlessly share them with others. Through this process of revisiting, I gradually accepted my identity as a political writer: my writing cannot be separated from my reflections on social issues. I must not trim these aspects away from my story. If they are not allowed, I would rather keep my stories to myself.

I came to study in the United States hoping to find a way to improve the grim future of my country’s freedom of expression, yet I was soon disenchanted. First, it was heartbreaking to

learn that banning certain books from school libraries is still a common practice here. Besides that, I was disappointed by the public's unanimous indifference, no matter their political stance, towards conditions in other parts of the world. Just as in China, most people are not concerned about how institutional racism is silencing racial minorities today; many of my American peers, who are dedicated to fighting against censorship, could not care less about the deteriorating free speech conditions in China at the same time. When I tried to bring up my own experience to criticize China's deprivation of citizens' freedom of speech, I received backlash from an American peer, who was worried that my grim description of China would fuel Sinophobia. Last winter, during China's "white paper movement,"¹ some took it as a piece of evidence that Chinese people have freedom of dissent, ignoring that nothing could actually be written down on the blank placards people held.

To me, these simplistic ways of discussing China are rooted in indifference towards an entity far away from home. For many, China is a place they may never visit, the free speech situation thus becomes secondary, if that, in their activism. So they turned away as I shared my lived experience seeing what they wanted to see. However, solidarity is essential in fighting against the global issue of declining free speech: the techniques for suppressing free speech are interoperable among tyrants who want to shut people up. Free speech advocates, in order to resist, must work together, involving not only the local issues but also the pains and struggles of the cultural others. The condition of a different country with different sociocultural situations might seem confusing at first, but we must push ourselves to learn more about each other and speak up, in a culturally sensitive way, for those who are silenced.

I, therefore, decide that, if I cannot become a creative writer, I will use my power to facilitate cross-culture communication and understanding of freedom of expression.

"My private tragedy... is that I had to abandon my natural idiom, my untrammelled, rich, and infinitely docile Russian tongue for a second-rate brand of English," said Vladimir Nabokov.² Although of a different situation in this cultural exile, I find his pain relatable. Today, I write this piece in my imperfect English, strenuously, to remind people that the impact of censorship is personal. It can stifle a person's dream. I also write to call for people around the world who are willing to change the precarious future of free speech to collaborate by educating and advocating for each other. My lifelong dream was to tell stories, but I never feel comfortable enough to write creatively in English. However, my shattered dream spurred the emergence of some new ambitions:

I hope to build a world where nobody would give up story-telling due to deteriorating freedom of expression. I hope writing in a non-native language will only be a personal choice, not because being honest in your native tongue would put you in danger. I hope that one day in my lifetime, I could write this piece boldly and unapologetically in Chinese for my Chinese-speaking community.

In order to achieve these goals, I'm using my voice in an alternative way from now on.

¹ Che, Chang, and Amy Chang Chien. "Memes, Puns and Blank Sheets of Paper: China's Creative Acts of Protest." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 28 Nov. 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/28/world/asia/china-protests-blank-sheets.html>

² Nabokov Vladimir Vladimirovič, and Alfred Appel. *The Annotated "Lolita": Revised and Updated*. Vintage Books, 1991, pp.414.

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