Censorship and female identity in contemporary China

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Abstract

This dissertation examines how theatre censorship operates in Xi Jinping's China, particularly in feminist theatre. By focusing on interviews with Zhiheshe members, a student organization that performed *The Vagina Monologues* for over a decade, this research highlights the strategies feminist practitioners adopt to navigate institutional, public, and self-imposed censorship. Drawing on theories of power by Foucault, Butler, and Bourdieu, it explores how censorship not only restricts feminist voices but shapes public discourse on gender and identity. The study fills a gap in literature on contemporary feminist theatre in China, providing insight into the complex dynamics between censorship, gender, and cultural expression in an authoritarian context.

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Introduction

Censorship is a multidimensional phenomenon that serves as "the handmaiden of power without which it is inconceivable. It is an instrument to assist in the attainment, preservation or continuance of somebody's power, whether exercised by an individual, an institution or a state. It is the extension of physical power into the realm of the mind and the spirit" (Callamard, 2006, p.2). On the basis of this argumentation, the term "censorship" covers all interferences of human rights, including the right to free speech and expression; therefore, censorship can also be interpreted as the servant of gender-based power and discrimination. Communication and media censorship based on gender have been crucial in the civilising process of nations and societies, particularly where patriarchy has dominated because the dominant gender group feared losing control over the political, social, and moral order when female sexuality and freedom of expression were regarded as a danger. One of the most common responses to this perceived threat has been the institutional suppression of women's voices, a practice referred to as institutional censorship in this dissertation.

This study takes a broader and more nuanced approach to understanding censorship, drawing on the theoretical perspectives of Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, and Pierre Bourdieu. These scholars provide critical insights into power, discourse, and social control, which form the foundation for examining the complex relationship between censorship and feminist theatre in China.

At the core of this study is Michel Foucault's theory of power and discourse. Foucault suggests that power is not simply repressive but also productive—it shapes knowledge and social practices, and determines what can be said or expressed within a society. In *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault, 1975), he examines how institutions enforce power through discourse, influencing what is seen as legitimate or illegitimate speech. For this study, Foucault's theory helps illustrate that censorship in China goes beyond silencing dissent; it actively shapes what can be articulated in public. This is particularly relevant for feminist theatre, as Foucault's understanding of power reveals how censorship and discourse interact—where power operates not only through explicit prohibitions but also through subtle forms of control that define the boundaries of acceptable discussions on gender and sexuality.

Foucault's concept of governmentality further enriches this analysis by explaining how the state employs various mechanisms to regulate and control populations. In China, censorship and propaganda work together to construct a national identity that reinforces traditional gender norms and patriarchal structures. Feminist theatre, as a form of oppositional discourse, becomes a site of struggle, where state power is both challenged and reinforced. The productive aspect of censorship, as described by Foucault, is crucial for understanding how feminist theatre practitioners navigate these boundaries, striving to make their voices heard within the constraints of Chinese society. By viewing censorship as a form of discourse production, this study examines how feminist theatre not only resists these limitations but also adapts to them, finding ways to critique within the boundaries of what is allowed.

Building upon Foucault's insights, Judith Butler further develops the idea that censorship is a productive force. In *Excitable Speech* (Butler, 1997), she argues that censorship not only limits what can be said but also shapes the conditions under which speech occurs. According to Butler (1997), both the censor and the censored are influenced by the power dynamics that determine what counts as acceptable discourse. This perspective is essential for understanding how feminist theatre practitioners in China work within a system that not only restricts their expression but also defines the terms of their engagement with public discourse. Butler's theory helps explore how feminist playwrights adapt to censorship, strategically crafting their narratives to stay within acceptable limits while still conveying subversive messages that challenge patriarchal norms.

Pierre Bourdieu offers another crucial perspective, particularly through his concept of the field of cultural production. In *The Field of Cultural Production* (Bourdieu, 1993), Bourdieu discusses how cultural products—such as art, literature, and theatre—are shaped by a constant tension between creative forces and the constraints of censorship. For Bourdieu (1993), censorship is not merely an external force imposed on cultural producers; it is an intrinsic part of the process by which cultural works are created. In the context of feminist theatre in China, Bourdieu's theory shows how censorship functions not only as a form of state control but also as a structural force within the field of theatre production. This study uses Bourdieu's framework to analyse how feminist theatre practitioners balance their creative impulses with the need to conform to state restrictions, examining how

censorship shapes the content, form, and reception of their work.

Censorship, by its very nature, seeks to create an authoritative monologue. As Müller (2004, p.13) points out, the discourses legitimizing censorship often present it as a means of protecting the public from supposedly harmful influences. This leads to the construction of a uniform subject and common interests, denying the legitimacy of dissenting opinions. A "canon," shaped by censorship, becomes a tool "to measure cultural products" (ibid.). Polish theatre critic and historian Marta Fik went even further, describing the censor as the "co-author" of theatre productions, with influence that ranged "from deletion—most frequently—to additions, replacements of words, sentences, comments, and meanings, to giving advice during both writing and staging" (Balasinski, 2010, p.144). By interfering with both the existing and historical artistic landscape through alterations and omissions, censors have not only changed specific works but have also played a role in creating the artistic output of their time (Fik, 1995, as cited in Balasinski, 2010, p.144). However, their names never appeared in the credits due to their secretive involvement.

This postmodern understanding of censorship aligns with the broader notion of censorship as not merely silencing but also contributing to the creation of meaning. It acts as both a destructive and constructive force, often steering the creative process in particular directions. Thus, this study extends beyond traditional notions of censorship, exploring how censorship in contemporary China operates not only through institutional prohibitions but also through self-censorship, propaganda, and public opinion.

When the Cultural Revolution came to an end and after Mao Zedong's death in 1976, it was commonly believed that theatre production in the People's Republic of China abandoned the strict and binding rules of Maoist discourse and Chinese socialist realism and gained a certain degree of freedom of expression since Zhou Enlai 周恩来 and Deng Xiaoping 邓小平 revised literary and artistic regulations respectively in 1971 and 1975 (Chen, Chun, & Liu, 2021, p.5). Yet, censorship has never been eliminated from Chinese theatre. It has only grown more subtle and complex, and when Xi Jinping 习近平 came to power in 2013, there appeared to be a tendency for a rebound of strict

censoring. During the reign of Mao, censorship was more concerned with political stance, and creative works were required to adhere to socialist principles. The loosening of censorship policies in the 1980s led to a surge in contemporary theatre, however, many policies were restored in the 1990s, particularly following the 1989 Tiananmen Square demonstrations, which led to the persecution of intellectuals and artists who were considered to be a threat to the stability of the regime. When Xi took over as the leader of China in 2013, even stricter instituted censorship policies started to be implemented. Xi's "Chinese Dream" (*Zhongguo meng* 中国梦) ideological propaganda aspires to promote China's nationalistic principles and cultural traditions. The government of Xi has taken a harsher position on censorship, especially with regard to feminist works, which are viewed as a threat to China's traditionally patriarchal social and cultural norms. Such a framework tends to encourage authors to actively cooperate with the Party's long-term political objectives while allowing them to include certain acceptably critical points or even subtle subversive undertones.

In Xi's China, propaganda has a particularly noticeable impact on China. The term "propaganda", in common usage, refers to ways in which governments and parties seek to control information and communication technologies. The global scope of war in the early twentieth century led to a rapid expansion of governmental institutions committed to public opinion, mass mobilisation, military recruiting, and wartime information, despite the common perception that both propaganda and censorship are inherently antidemocratic. A similar argument may be made about the history of propaganda and censorship in China, which is embedded in the worldwide history of mass politics. Politics in China are often associated with the use of moral persuasion to accomplish instrumental ends. The American social reformer Bruno Lasker (1937, p.153) wrote that "in China, the use of psychological conditioning to affect political ends is an old-established art." Censorship blocks specific channels of communication or prevents messages from reaching bigger audiences, while propaganda conveys messages. Both are employed by the powerful in order to sway the opinions and actions of those under them, and they remain to be permanent fixtures in contemporary Chinese culture. Constant psychological pressure and self-censorship are produced in China's pan-politicized social context as a result of propaganda and instigation from the state authority, a patriarchal social order, and a family structure steeped in traditional culture. The government's long-term patriotic education

and the increasingly complex and powerful censorship system have encouraged a new generation of fanatical nationalists, transforming them into a group of pervasive, spontaneous censors, ultimately inviting public censorship over feminists. These public censors are criticizing feminist ideas and theatre productions voluntarily, hiding behind the call for free speech, yet depriving others (namely, anyone inconsistent with the Party's interest) of free will by secretly reporting feminists to the government. This comes after Xi Jinping identified emphasis on patriotic education and public opinion as one of the major issues of the Party.

All the factors mentioned above contribute to a growing trend of self-censorship among theatre practitioners, particularly feminists, who are concerned about the backlash they would receive for creating politically sensitive works. The rise of "safer" productions that adhere to government policies is a direct outcome of self-censorship. As a result of their own subversive efforts, feminists are now acutely aware of the political boundaries established by the state, which ironically puts them under the grip of a state that is continuously keeping tabs on non-governmental organisations. The state's harsh treatment of the few feminists who had the courage to take action publicly and work on controversial topics established a no-go area: anything having to do with "national security," including labour organising, ethnic conflicts, and the violation of citizens' rights by any branch of government.

Existing research relevant to censorship in China focuses primarily on three areas: censorship of Chinese theatre, censorship of feminists, and Chinese censorship in general. Scholars in the first field tend to focus on Chinese theatre from the last century, such as Siyuan Liu's *Theatre Reform as Censorship: Censoring Traditional Theatre in China in the Early 1950s* (2009) and Xiaomei Chen's *Acting the Right Part: Political Theatre and Popular Drama in Contemporary China* (2002). Although these studies do not directly address contemporary theatre censorship, they provide valuable historical context by explaining how and why 20th-century theatre censorship regulations were imposed, how artists responded to them, and how the works ultimately looked. These research results offer an essential background for my study, particularly in understanding the legacy of socialist realism and political control in the arts.

More recent literature, such as Rossella Ferrari's *Pop Goes the Avant-Garde: Experimental Theatre in*

Contemporary China (2012), takes a closer look at the evolution of experimental theatre in post-Mao China. Ferrari's work is crucial in illuminating how avant-garde theatre artists have navigated and resisted the political constraints of the state. However, Ferrari (2012) focuses more on the avant-garde movement broadly, without addressing feminist interventions specifically. This dissertation seeks to fill this gap by examining how feminist theatre practitioners have both utilized and struggled within the contemporary censorship framework in China, particularly under Xi Jinping's leadership. While Ferrari provides insights into the strategies used by experimental theatre to resist censorship, my work focuses on how feminist theatre navigates the additional challenges posed by gender-based censorship.

Similarly, Margaret E. Roberts's *Censored: Distraction and Diversion Inside China's Great Firewall* (2018) offers a broader examination of the mechanisms of censorship in the digital age, particularly through the lens of distraction and diversion rather than outright suppression. Roberts (2018) argues that censorship in contemporary China has evolved into a more complex system that uses digital platforms to control public discourse. This idea of "soft" censorship resonates with the growing trend of self-censorship and the role of propaganda in shaping the public sphere, which this dissertation addresses in relation to feminist theatre. While Roberts focuses primarily on digital media, my study extends these insights to the theatre industry, exploring how similar mechanisms of distraction and indirect control affect live performance and the expression of feminist ideas in the public sphere.

In addition, Jia Tan's *Digital Masquerade: Feminist Rights and Queer Media in China* (2023) offers a timely exploration of feminist and queer activism in China's digital media landscape. Tan (2023) discusses how digital platforms have become sites of resistance for marginalised groups, but also how these platforms are subject to heavy surveillance and censorship. Although Tan's work focuses more on digital media and activism, her analysis of feminist resistance under state surveillance is relevant to how feminist theatre in China operates under similar pressures. This dissertation builds on Tan's exploration of feminist strategies by examining how feminist theatre practitioners navigate state restrictions in digital spaces and in the public, physical spaces of theatre, often employing self-censorship and subtle forms of critique to avoid state repression.

Furthermore, studies like Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts's (2013) article, *How*

Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression, offer insights into how censorship selectively permits individual criticism while suppressing collective movements. This pattern of selective censorship is particularly relevant to feminist theatre in China, where individual feminist voices may be tolerated as long as they do not organize or mobilize collective actions. My study draws on these insights to explore how feminist theatre navigates the state's tolerance for certain expressions of dissent while avoiding direct confrontations with the government's broader agenda of maintaining social harmony.

In summary, while significant scholarship exists on censorship in China, there is a gap in the literature concerning feminist theatre and its specific challenges under contemporary censorship regimes. This dissertation aims to contribute to this gap by focusing on how feminist theatre in China has evolved in response to both traditional censorship mechanisms and newer forms of digital surveillance and propaganda, extending existing research to include the unique experiences of feminist theatre practitioners in negotiating these constraints.

This dissertation contributes to the scholarly understanding of censorship, feminist theatre, and contemporary Chinese society by addressing some gaps in the existing literature. While there is notable research on censorship in China, particularly regarding media and theatre, limited attention is given to the specific challenges faced by feminist theatre under contemporary censorship regimes. This study aims to fill that gap by examining how feminist theatre in China has adapted to both traditional censorship mechanisms and newer forms of digital surveillance and propaganda. By engaging with these developments, this dissertation seeks to offer insights into how feminist theatre practitioners navigate these constraints, adding to the broader conversation on the relationship between gender, power, and censorship.

The importance of this study is further contextualized by the political shifts that have taken place since Xi Jinping's rise to power, marked by a series of transformative policies. This period has had significant implications for artistic expression and public discourse in China. Despite the importance of these developments, there is a relative lack of academic research examining how censorship has specifically influenced feminist theatre during this era. This dissertation addresses this gap by exploring the

contemporary landscape of censorship in Xi's China, particularly focusing on the requirements and limitations imposed on literary and artistic works. It aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the complexities involved in theatre production under tight regulatory oversight.

Additionally, one notable gap in the existing scholarship is the limited availability of first-hand accounts from theatre practitioners with direct experience in navigating China's censorship system. To help fill this gap, this study includes in-depth interviews with three members of Zhiheshe 知和社, a gender-studies-focused student organization at Fudan University. They participated in the production of *The Vagina Monologues* (TVM) in 2006, 2013, and 2015. Zhiheshe performed TVM continuously for 13 years until it was prohibited in 2018 by the university under government pressure, making it the group that worked with this play the longest in mainland China. In 2015, Zhiheshe's TVM became the first theatre selected by Shanghai Pride, the first LGBTQ+ festival in mainland China, featuring art exhibitions, film screenings, literature events, and sports competitions, as well as fundraising for gender-related NGOs (Zhiheshe, 2015).

The interviews provide practical insights into how censorship operates, its effects on artistic decisions, and the strategies employed to comply with or resist these controls. By focusing on this specific case study, the research offers a perspective on how censorship impacts feminist theatre production in contemporary China. By analysing this case study, the dissertation aims to contribute to the field of theatre studies and enhance the understanding of how censorship interacts with artistic expression and socio-political dynamics in China. It is hoped that this research will add to the ongoing discussion of how creative professionals in tightly regulated environments manage the balance between compliance and subtle resistance.

It is important to acknowledge both the limitations this study despite its strengths. Firstly, the findings in this dissertation, which explore the intersection of feminist theatre and censorship in mainland China, cannot be directly applied to other Chinese-speaking regions such as Taiwan and Hong Kong. These areas have different political contexts and censorship frameworks, making a comparative analysis beyond the scope of this research. Each region's unique socio-political environment requires separate

investigations to fully understand the dynamics at play within their respective theatre scenes.

Secondly, while this research benefited from the involvement of prominent members of the Chinese feminist movement and connections to other feminist NGOs, it is crucial to clarify that the conclusions drawn from the interviews and research findings do not represent the entire situation for all feminist NGOs or commercial theatre groups in China. The focus of this study is on specific individuals and experiences within the feminist theatre movement, while the case of Zhiheshe, with its shared challenges of funding and censorship similar to feminist NGOs, provides a valuable basis for comparative analysis in future research.

Lastly, it is essential to consider the external factors that limited the scope of this study. The global outbreak of COVID-19, combined with the researcher residing outside of China during the research period, created logistical challenges that prevented a return to China to reach additional potential interviewees. Additionally, due to the politically sensitive nature of this study, the broad recruitment of interviewees posed risks, including potential government surveillance and repercussions. These constraints resulted in a smaller sample size for the interviews, which, in turn, limited the diversity of perspectives included in the study.

The primary methodology of this dissertation centres on semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted with feminist theatre practitioners. These interviews are the foundation of this research, providing valuable insights into the complex world of feminist theatre under censorship in China. A deliberate and thoughtful selection process was used to choose the interviewees. Three individuals, each significantly involved in the production of TVM at different points in time, were selected for their unique perspectives and experiences. The interviewees participated in the production of the play during three key years—2006, 2013, and 2015. These years were strategically chosen for their particular significance within the socio-political and cultural landscape of China. The year 2006 represents an earlier phase in China's development, offering insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by feminist theatre practitioners when there was relatively more freedom. In 2013, China experienced major shifts in its political and cultural climate with Xi Jinping coming to power, marking a turning point that affected not only politics but also the arts and activism. Lastly, 2015 represents a more recent

context, providing a view of how feminist theatre has adapted and evolved in response to changing circumstances. By interviewing practitioners from these distinct periods, this study aims to illuminate the multifaceted journey of feminist theatre in China. The experiences and perspectives of these individuals help us understand how feminist theatre has navigated, resisted, and adapted to censorship amidst the shifting socio-political dynamics of contemporary China.

The structure of this dissertation will be divided into two sections. The first chapter is titled *Censorship and feminism in China's pan-politicised context*. In this chapter, I will discuss that theatre has historically been a target of censorship because of its social function and political connotation, with a brief look back at the history of modern Chinese theatre. The reason why history is emphasised is that "China's 5,000-year civilisation" frequently appears in Chinese history textbooks. This historicist expression makes Chinese politics frequently associated with the use of moral suasion to achieve instrumental ends, which leads to a strong sense of political reversibility stemming from the Chinese clan structure and Confucian ethics. This association, which has been strengthened under Xi Jinping, created a narrative that the stability of the patriarch-led family rests on the shoulders of the good wife and mother, leading to a regressive trend in women's social identity and status. Furthermore, there will be a thorough discussion of the pan-politicisation of Chinese society, in order to prepare a context for the discussion of the formation of public and self-censorship in China.

The second chapter, titled *A case study of The Vagina Monologues*, is based on an interview with three participants[1] in TVM produced by Zhiheshe, respectively in 2006, 2013 and 2015. I will investigate, based on the experiences of the interviewees, at what stage and in what form institutional censorship, propaganda and public censorship, and self-censorship play a part in the production of feminist theatre. Being a student organisation, Zhiheshe is subject to institutional repression from both the government and the university. Due to the vagueness of restrictions regarding theatre production, it is frequently a game of luck whether a play will be banned. In addition to direct censorship regulations, some mechanisms that have nothing to do with censorship itself restrict the living space of feminism from an indirect perspective, such as restricting the funding routes for theatre groups and non-governmental

[1] The interviewees will be called A, B, and C in the following chapters for ethical reasons and confidentiality, according to their consent.

organisations, which can also be viewed as a form of institutional censorship. In the second chapter, it will be illustrated that although censorship from the public sometimes might be confused with public free speech, the Chinese government's strong support for whistleblowing and its commitment to long-term patriotic education distinguishes it from democratic nations. Domestic citizens are gradually educated into a censoring mechanism. It will be demonstrated that this strategy might further diminish the living space and creative flexibility of feminist theatre. Through reports and attacks from public opinion, the censorship system can determine a play's continued existence (or not) throughout the performance stage without interfering with its early creation process. Another important argument in the second chapter is that although self-censorship sometimes sounds like a dirty word with a hidden attack on individuals for not speaking out, it may have been precisely self-censorship that gives feminists a certain amount of space, as in the case of feminist NGOs and theatre practitioners. Despite the fact that the method of developing self-censorship can limit the expressive content and treatment of certain significant themes in feminist theatre, the major objective of feminists in China is to "be heard" in the harsh climate of censorship.

Censorship and feminism in China's pan-politicised context

As a forum for public speech, the theatre can serve a social function by presenting political messages. Dialogue can be turned into speech exchanges between the stage and the audience, and hence its impact upon the audience is direct and effective. Because of this didactic and social function, Western-inspired spoken drama became a platform for revolution in modern China. Compared with fiction and poetry, Chinese drama has been constantly exposed to Western influence since the end of the 19th century, so much so that modern Chinese drama is a complete departure from its traditional form. Play with realistic scenery and dialogue was called "Civilised play" (*Wenmingxi* 文明戏) (Liu, 2013, p.8). In 1919, China saw the May Fourth Movement, a patriotic cultural renovation movement aiming at emancipating the populace's consciousness of social issues. During this period, a form of theatre known as "new drama" (*xinju* 新剧) evolved based on crude stage plays, later renamed "spoken drama" (*huaju* 话剧) in 1928 (Liu, 2013, p.9).

The "new" of spoken drama was not only in opposition to the "old" of traditional Chinese opera but also to the "old" of ideology and social structures at the time, which were considered to have fundamentally led to the country's corruption (Hu, 2018, p.54). This connection between the renewal of drama and ideology was not first seen during the May Fourth period in modern Chinese drama history, considering Chinese social activist Liang Qichao, for the first time in 1902, explicitly linked theatre to social transformation: "Therefore, if we seek to modify our existing approach to social issues, we must begin with a revolution in fiction; if we seek to renew people, we must first renew fiction" (Liang, 1980, p.161). In his sense, the theatre was included in the definition of "fiction".[2] Therefore, when the contradiction over whether to keep or abolish traditional opera provoked passionate debate among intellectuals at the time, it was based on a consensus of confirming the social and political function of theatre and highlighting its importance for social improvement. Whether it was Li Taohen, who believed that plays should always be devoid of singing[3] (Li, 1918,

[2] Translated by the author. The original text is: "故今日欲改良群治，必自小说界革命始，欲新民，必自新小说始。" Liang Qichao's original text mentioned drama works such as *The Romance of the western chamber (Xixiangji)* and *The peach blossom fan (Taohuashan).* In traditional Chinese literature, "fiction" also includes legends (chuanqi) and operas, and there was no clear distinction between the two; meanwhile, there was no clear distinction between opera, drama and theatre either.

[3] Translated by the author. The original text is: "戏者，固以无唱为原则者也。"

p.19), or Hu Shi, who considered that traditional opera's stylised motions were unrealistic and deceiving[4] (Hu, 1918, para.18), these theatre innovators were not merely motivated by aesthetic concerns to reject traditional opera's legitimacy. When radicals attempted to innovate theatre and literature, what they were critiquing and reforming intrinsically was China's political status quo. The condemnation of the "old" drama was intended to facilitate the formation of the "new" drama and thus facilitate the "new" democratic idea of enlightenment. The instrumental and political purposes of spoken drama inevitably invited a closer examination of itself from the censor.

The historically established political function of spoken drama set a basis for the discussion of modern and contemporary theatre in China. Link describes the Chinese socialist censorship regime of the 1980s, focusing heavily on censorship and self-censorship (2000). He noted that the Chinese socialist literary censorship system was less institutional and depended mostly on psychological discipline, emphasising the requirement for ideological instruction and intentional self-censorship (Link, 2000, p.149). This notion ties into Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the "field of cultural production," where censorship and self-censorship are not simply imposed from above but internalised within the artistic field itself. Artists, writers, and theatre practitioners are conditioned to navigate the boundaries set by power structures, shaping their creations according to what is permissible, even if subconsciously (Bourdieu, 1993, p.35). Thus, the private calculation of risks and balances mentioned by Link aligns with Bourdieu's framework of how individuals navigate social constraints while producing culture.

Before performing any action in this system, every individual had to negotiate their position concerning the political atmosphere and their personal connections. Such an atmosphere and the immense burden of personal responsibility in all realms of literary and artistic production inevitably led to the intensification of self-censorship. According to Barmé, who borrowed Haraszti's metaphor of the "velvet prison" to describe China's situation: "[...] forceful indoctrination was replaced with self-imposed acquiescence [...]" (1999, p.3). Here, Judith Butler's notion of censorship as a productive force comes into play. Butler argues that censorship not only restricts what can be said but also defines the boundaries of acceptable speech, shaping the conditions for discourse (Butler, 1997). In the context

[4] Translated by the author. The original text is: "不真不实，自欺欺人。"

of Chinese theatre, this internalized censorship, shaped by political and social forces, defines what can and cannot be expressed on stage, leading artists to self-regulate their expressions to ensure survival within a highly regulated environment.

Political considerations are fundamentally and inevitably personal in a censored society. Because dramatic styles and techniques were inseparable from their historical and political contexts, they were never considered by the artists as merely formalistic concepts. They reflect the theatre artists' worldview, stance on the characters they portray and the audience they seek to appeal, the national ideologies they appropriate or manipulate in expressing their ideas, and the collective consciousness that has generated theatrical space as a relatively coherent imagined community.

The Communist Party's promotion of "socialist art" has further strengthened the political and social functions of theatre works. Mao Zedong 毛泽东 emphasised the critical role of state-controlled media in establishing legitimacy when he remarked, "In the world today, all culture, all literature and art belong to definite classes and are geared to definite political lines" (Mao, 1942, p.86). With the censorship eliminating the possible rebellious order, as the other side of the same coin, the role of propaganda here was not simply "the means by which the converted attempted to persuade the unconverted" (Taylor, 2003, p.4) but also for the new establishment of order. Despite the immense changes that have transpired in China in the four and a half decades following Mao's death and the commencement of market-oriented economic reform, this phrase remains a guide for the CCP leadership's cultural policies. On October 15, 2015, Xi Jinping delivered a speech at the "Beijing Forum on Literature and Art" (*Zai wenyigongzuo zuotanhui shang de jianghua* 在文艺工作座谈会上的讲话), which was immediately compared to Mao's speech from 1942. In his introductory talk, headlined "Literature and Art cannot Lose the Course in the Waves of Market Economy," Xi emphasised the significance of producing works that "will not cast any shadows of doubts on our great nation and our wonderful era" (Xi, 2015). Targeting primarily commercialised, consumerist, "fast food" production, he repeated the idea, originally put forward by Mao in 1956 and again by Jiang Zemin in 2002, of "letting a hundred flowers bloom and a hundred schools of thought contend" (*Baihua qifang,*

baijia zhengming 百花齐放，百家争鸣) in a call for a variety of forms and themes, but, on the other hand, he emphasised that "the socialist art is primarily the art of the people." As such, it must "represent people's voice and continue to serve people and socialism." Similar to the revolutionary romanticism of the 1950s and 1960s, contemporary literature and art should "combine the spirit of realism with romantic idealism [...] use light to fight the darkness, use beauty to fight ugliness, and show people glory and hope, tell them that the dream is achievable." Xi even used the concept of artists as "the engineer of the human soul," which was first employed in 1934 by Zhdanov, the father of Soviet socialist realism during Stalin's reign (Westerman, 2010). Lastly, he criticized works that "ridicule the sublime, distort the classics, invert history, incapable of distinguishing between truth and deception, good and evil, beautiful and ugly, and solely focus on the dark aspects of society." Several artworks, although not particularly named, were compared to drugs, while others were referred to as "culture garbage." Even the frequently discussed slogan "art for art" did not escape the leader's condemnation (Xi, 2015).

As indicated, Chinese theatre censorship has been marked by constant psychological pressure, self-censorship, risk-balancing, and strong relationships between individuals and society. Foucault's notion of disciplinary power (Foucault, 1975, pp.170-171) can be used to explain how censorship operates on multiple levels in contemporary Chinese society. Rather than being purely repressive, the system encourages conformity by embedding surveillance into social norms and expectations, leading individuals to self-censor without direct intervention from the state. Artists are not only producing work within the confines of the official censorship system, but they are also participating in the production of social norms through their art, reinforcing the boundaries of discourse even as they push against them.

In the case of contemporary China, where one or more components of the nuanced and highly subjective control mechanism fail, artists are rarely imprisoned, and the typical use of physical violence during the Cultural Revolution is not applied anymore. On the one hand, theatre productions that do not meet censorship requirements are frequently banned. When the situation is more severe, the government-run media may refer to the responsible party as a "tumour of the society" (*shehui duliu*

社会毒瘤). In market economy conditions, any "scandal" could stimulate the audience's interest and garner recognition for artists, but would frequently result in the loss of state employment, social position, or Party membership for all those involved. A recent example is the 2021 incident involving the actor Zhang Zhehan 张哲瀚[5], whose association with controversial symbols led to swift social and institutional condemnation. This example highlights how both the state and the public play roles in censorship, further expanding Foucault's idea of surveillance as a decentralized form of social control, where power flows through multiple channels rather than being imposed from a single point.

When the artworks in China are seen through the lens of political structure and social consciousness, it is clear that modern China is formed on a highly politicised society. Tsou Tang, an American political scientist of Chinese ancestry, advanced a critical political theory known as "totalism", referring to the concept that political power can infiltrate and dominate any field of society or facet of individual life without regard for rules, ethics, or religion (Tsou, 2000, p.223). The distinction between totalism and totalitarianism is that the former employs unrestricted authority to promote social revolution; the latter, on the other hand, often seeks to hinder or extinguish revolutionary movements.

From the standpoint of political structure, some historians feel that modern China has devolved into a "post-totalism" regime (Xiao, 1999).[6] It is considered that the extent of the state's political control has increasingly decreased and that it is now restricted to areas directly or indirectly related to the regime's security; under the premise of not affecting national security and political stability, some diversification has occurred. Culture, education, entertainment, academic research, and non-political groups, among other things, will evolve into self-organising systems outside the state's control. However, in this still tightly regulated environment, censorship remains pervasive, with significant uncertainty over what the state may interpret as threatening.

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[5] Zhang, Z. (2021, August 14). *Zhang Zhehan Jingguo Shenshe qian heying: Ni wangle 30wan beitushade tongbao lema* [Zhang Zhehan taking a photo in front of the Yasukuni Shrine: Have you forgotten the 300,000 compatriots who were massacred]. Netease. https://www.163.com/dy/article/GHCDS1HL0512856T.html

[6] The annotation in Xiao's original article is "post-totalitarianism," while the Chinese term he uses is 全能主义 (*quannengzhuyi*), which should be interpreted as post-totalism. The author has re-translated this term in accordance with the Chinese meaning.

This political environment leads to what Butler discussed as the performative nature of speech and how speech acts are regulated, shaped by societal norms, and enforced through institutional and cultural norms (1997, pp.1-15). By regulating the boundaries of acceptable discourse, the Chinese state not only suppresses opposition but also shapes the contours of what can be said, creating a form of political speech that is sanctioned by the regime. This dynamic is particularly relevant for feminist theatre, which must navigate the fine line between expressing critical ideas about gender and remaining within the limits of acceptable discourse.

Another feature of China's political status quo is the concept of "pan-politicisation," where aspects of life outside the political domain, such as economics, science, and education, are drawn into the political sphere (Cheng, 2006; Sun, 2006; Ni, 2010). Feminist theatre, for example, does not merely engage with gender politics but also becomes a site of political contestation, subject to both state censorship and public scrutiny. Bourdieu's (1993) notion of the "field of cultural production" is useful here, as it demonstrates how cultural actors are constantly negotiating between creative freedom and the forces of censorship that define the boundaries of their work. In this sense, feminist theatre practitioners are both constrained by and complicit in the very structures that seek to limit their expression.

Chinese politics are also frequently associated with the use of moral suasion to achieve instrumental ends, which leads to a strong sense of political reversibility stemming from the Chinese clan structure and Confucian ethics. The clan structure and Confucian ethics are also where Xi's neo-familism emerged (Yan, 2018, pp.185-186). Xi's emphasis on family values and gender roles, particularly the virtues of women as mothers and wives, reinforces the patriarchal structures that feminist theatre aims to challenge. In this context, censorship becomes a tool not only for controlling political dissent but also for reinforcing traditional gender roles, thereby limiting the potential for feminist voices to challenge these norms.

As feminism in China continues to face significant constraints from both government censorship and public opinion, feminist theatre practitioners must carefully navigate the boundaries of acceptable speech. Even as they self-censor to avoid state repression, they continue to challenge the status quo

through subtle and indirect critiques of patriarchy. This tension between censorship and resistance is central to understanding how feminist theatre operates in contemporary China, a theme that will be further explored in the following chapters of this dissertation.

Only within this political and historical framework of the dynamics between Chinese theatre, pan-politicisation and censorship is it possible to investigate the dilemmas confronting feminism in China. In such a highly political and hegemonic culture, the survival of feminism in China is tied to severe censorship. Owing to the severe worldwide reactions to the 1989 Tiananmen Square incident, the government sought to reconnect with the international community in the early 1990s. In 1995, when the United Nations announced plans for The Forth Conference on Women, the Chinese leadership saw it as a chance to rebrand itself internationally (Wang, 2019). This conference introduced China to both the notion of gender and the NGO forum, as a consequence of the collaborative efforts of global feminists. Feminists working within Chinese government institutions actively seized this opportunity to gain back the legitimacy of Chinese NGOs after the incident of 1989 and open up the social space for feminists (Wang, 2019). However, in stark contrast to transnational feminist emphasis upon several systems of oppression and intersectionality of gender, class, racism, ethnicity, sexuality, etc., "class" is conspicuously absent from Chinese feminist articulation. In China, the rapid ascent of the analytical category "gender" comes at the expense of the eradication of the analytical category "class." Feminists in China have enthusiastically embraced gender just as the term "class" has become a new political taboo (Wang, 2009, p.113). By proposing an essentialist conception of women, women researchers in the 1980s contributed to the deconstruction of a Maoist class analysis that obscured and eliminated gender issues.

In the post-Mao market economy, neoliberalism and extreme class polarisation have increased over the past two decades, and the state has imposed stringent surveillance on spontaneous class-related organisational activity (Wang, 2009, p.2). Yet, class and gender frequently cross, resulting in huge female populations in both urban and rural communities with little resources. In this context, the ascendance and prominence of "gender" during the past decade serves as both a feminist method to promote the value of social justice against a dominant social Darwinist ideology in the midst of rampant capitalism and a feminist avoidance of sensitive themes such as class. A focus on gender could,

potentially, address class issues as well; and typically, gender equality programmes are already conceptually oriented towards the underprivileged and oppressed, including laid-off women employees, migrant workers, and domestic helpers. Nevertheless, without the flexibility to define a distinctly critical perspective that confronts different hierarchies and inequities, Chinese feminists run the risk of being co-opted by the state. Their effectiveness in engaging the state via the official Women Federation and their rhetorical legitimacy to pursue gender equality as part of full modernity have been made possible largely because most feminists actively operate within the limits of the contemporary political culture (Wang, 2009, p.114). At a time when women face the brunt of downsizing, layoffs, early retirement, and significant violations of labour rights in the private sector, nationwide networks advocating for women workers' rights have yet to materialise. Self-restraint is commonplace. A sentiment shared by many leading feminist activists is that the legitimacy obtained by mobilising around gender concerns might be jeopardised by involvement in politically contentious areas, said several prominent feminist activists (Wang, 2009, p.114). In the context of the pan-politicization of today's China, it is difficult for feminists to openly engage in meaningful debates about their political actions.

But, even when feminists are carefully self-censoring, their living space in China continues to diminish gradually. In Xi's era, feminism has evolved into a pronoun signifying the interference of Western anti-China forces (Huang, 2022, p.9). This rhetoric, reminiscent of strategies used during the Maoist era, positions feminists as traitors or conspirators aligned with foreign forces. As Judith Butler (1997, pp.122-125) suggests, censorship does not merely act as a limit on speech but also generates specific forms of speech by dictating what can be publicly expressed. In China's case, this manifests as the narrative that feminist activism represents a threat to national security, thereby justifying the suppression of feminist voices.

These fabricated allegations were intended to execute people whom the government perceived as a danger to the political authority; and there is no charge more severe than betraying one's own country, because, once again, it goes all the way back to the Confucian ideology rooted in Chinese culture. It is inscribed with the fear and hostility of an authoritarian regime towards ideological dissenting voices, utilising this fear and hostility to conduct internal political purges. The only view of the external world

that it permits is based on irrational imagination and tension.

In 2017, Xi Jinping delivered a speech as work guidance to the China Women's Federation:

> At present, our party is uniting and leading the country to win a decisive battle and build a moderately prosperous society, while the Western hostile forces have intensified their Westernization and differentiation strategy against our country. They actively promote Western feminism and feminist supremacy in opposition to our Marxist perspective on women and our country's fundamental national policy of gender equality. Some of them adopt slogans such as "rights assertion," "poverty alleviation," and "charity" while aggressively participating in women's affairs in our country and attempting to identify and patch gaps in the sphere of gender issues (Song, 2017).

This speech indicates that after suppressing one social movement after another with the accusation of collaborating with the so-called anti-China forces in 2017, this rhetoric has now officially begun to attack feminists; to prove this point, for example, in 2018, at the height of the #MeToo movement, the social media account Feminist Voices, which had nearly 200,000 followers, was permanently banned by censors. What gives anti-feminist activities even more legitimacy is a 12 April 2022 post by the Central Committee of the Communist Youth League of China on its official social media, denouncing "extreme feminism has become a tumour on the Internet"[7]. In the post, the committee stated that a recent collection of images depicting the historical events of the CCP's revolution was criticised by numerous Internet users for omitting women. It was claimed that these actions "break through the bottom line," and "extreme feminism has long been a source of conflict" (Gongqingtuan Zhongyang, 2022). "Those who deliberately use the term "feminist" throughout every situation are attempting to generate gender opposition. Recent events have demonstrated that "extreme feminism" has gotten increasingly pervasive, and its toxicity has become more violent. Every netizen needs to collaborate to eliminate the misinformation and restore internet clarity" (Gongqingtuan Zhongyang, 2022). The intervention of official discourse has made most Chinese women more and more scared of being

[7] The Central Committee of the Communist Youth League of China is the highest governing body of the official youth organization and almost all young Chinese are members in it.

labelled as feminists, and government and public censorship of feminism have made the development of it in China increasingly difficult.

Despite the many challenges, feminist theatre in China persists, even if in a limited and constrained way. As Judith Butler (1997, p.125) argues, censorship is not merely about silencing voices—it also shapes the kinds of expression that emerge. For feminist theatre in China, this means that while direct political statements are often suppressed, artists have found ways to embed their critiques subtly and creatively. By pushing the boundaries of what is acceptable, feminist theatre practitioners continue to carve out small spaces for resistance, even as those spaces shrink under Xi's increasingly authoritarian rule.

As the chapter transitions into a deeper analysis of feminist theatre's strategies to navigate censorship, it is clear that the interaction between state control, public opinion, and artistic resistance is complex and multifaceted. The following chapter will explore these dynamics in more detail by focusing on the case study of TVM, as performed by the feminist theatre group Zhiheshe, and the specific challenges they faced under China's censorship apparatus.

A case study of *The Vagina Monologues*

The Vagina Monologues in China

Since its 1996 release, Eve Ensler's feminist play TVM has become a significant work on female sexuality. Based on Ensler's interviews with 200 American women, the play presents various monologues dealing with the female experience, touching on topics including sexuality, love, menstruation, childbirth, and so forth. TVM's central premise—that the anatomical female body, represented through the vagina, is an instrument of empowerment and a site for unity, termed "global vagina-hood" (Cheng, 2009)—resonates in a multitude of cultural contexts, though it faces distinct challenges in each.

While the play has been performed in more than 140 countries and translated into over 48 languages, its reception in China exemplifies the complexities of feminist theatre under authoritarian scrutiny. As Interviewee B from Zhiheshe notes, their 2013 performance of TVM encountered censorship even at the level of promotional materials, with the word "vagina" often removed or altered in posters to avoid public outrage and administrative pushback (Appendix, p.62). This suggests that while the universal themes of TVM have global resonance, their specific articulation must be adjusted in China to navigate cultural taboos and censorship mechanisms.

Moreover, the 1999 launch of V-Day, a global activist movement based on TVM, further exemplifies the play's impact beyond theatre, becoming a symbol of feminist activism. However, in China, as Interviewee A recalls, public fundraising or sponsorship opportunities for feminist performances were virtually non-existent due to institutional restrictions (Appendix, p.55). For example, Zhiheshe's 2005 sponsorship from Durex, a rare exception, was more a matter of luck than a sustainable strategy, as strict university rules limited access to external funding sources. The systemic difficulty of securing funds reflects a broader governmental effort to control feminist voices through both economic and institutional constraints.

As feminist scholar Rong Weiyi 荣维毅 has summarised in her online essay, the travelling of TVM is vital to the growth of young female activist groups across China (Rong, 2021). In 2001, the first show

of TVM was held in English in Nanjing at the Johns Hopkins University-Nanjing University Centre for Chinese and American Studies. In 2003, the renowned feminist activist professor Ai Xiaoming 艾晓明 of Sun Yat-sen University substantially localised the narrative and organised its first Chinese-language show at the Guangzhou Museum of Art. After Ai Xiaoming's translation, numerous independent and student ensembles rehearsed and performed it multiple times. Students at top universities in mainland China, including Sun Yat-sen University, Fudan University, and Beijing Foreign Studies University, have staged TVM; feminist non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in China, such as Beaver Club (*Haili She* 海狸社) based in Shanghai and B-come based in Beijing, regarded the show as their important annual event (Fan, 2022); the internationally renowned Chinese contemporary artist and activist, Ai Weiwei, filmed a documentary in 2013 about the development of TVM in mainland China. It is fair to say that productions of TVM have become a platform for universities and NGOs to raise gender consciousness and a significant method for females to acquire feminist knowledge. Even though its public performance has been banned by the government today, feminist organisations such as B-come and VaChina continue to organise private rehearsals and workshops in the form of online or public performances.

TVM has established a systematic site-specification in China, but its adaptations have varied significantly depending on the social and political environment. For instance, Ai Xiaoming's 2003 adaptation at the Guangzhou Museum of Art was notable for addressing the issue of female child abandonment, a theme rooted in the traditional preference for boys over girls, thereby highlighting a critical gender issue specific to the Chinese context (Ai, 2003). This early adaptation set a pattern for future performances in China, where many productions of TVM deviated from the original script, adding local stories and adjusting content to better resonate with Chinese audiences.

However, these changes were not merely artistic choices but often responses to censorship pressures. Interviewee B recalls how in their 2013 performance at Zhiheshe, certain scenes were modified to avoid overt political commentary. For example, the character in the sexual harassment scene originally lists potential offenders, including mentors and friends. However, due to concerns about the scene being perceived as an attack on patriarchal structures, this segment was significantly altered, shifting

the focus from societal critique to individual experiences (Appendix, p.65). This reflects the pervasive influence of self-censorship in feminist theatre, as performers navigate the boundaries of what is deemed acceptable in a tightly controlled cultural space.

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "symbolic violence" is particularly relevant here, as the changes made to the script illustrate the subtle ways in which power operates through social structures, compelling artists to internalise and reproduce the dominant discourse (1993, pp.106-107). Unlike physical coercion, symbolic violence operates subtly, shaping perceptions and behaviours in ways that render individuals complicit in their own subjugation. In the context of script modifications, this concept highlights how performers, consciously or not, absorb societal expectations, adjusting their artistic choices to align with prevailing norms and thus reproducing these norms through their performance. By adjusting their performance to fit social and political expectations, the performers of TVM both resist and reinforce the patriarchal norms they aim to critique. As Interviewee C mentioned, these modifications were often a survival strategy to ensure the play could still be performed, even if it meant watering down its political message (Appendix, p.68).

Beijing based feminist NGO, B-come, incorporated its original scenes such as "First Night" (*Chuye* 初夜), "Sexual Assault" (*Xing qinhai* 性侵害), "Moaning" (*Shenyin* 呻吟), "Masturbation Class" (*Ziwei ketang* 自慰课堂), "Menstruation" (*Yuejing* 月经), "At Maternity Hospital" (*Zai fuchanke* 在妇产科), and "Bitch" (*Biao* 婊) in their 2013 production, which were, not only of that year but have always been controversial gender topics in modern China. B-come's adaption has later become a widely used version among performances produced by other theatre groups. Moreover, participants in TVM performances alter their lines in accordance with current affairs and new Chinese catchphrases of the year. For instance, in the 2013 edition, when GDP was a hot topic in China, there also appeared jokes referring to GDP in that script. Other feminist organisations like Beaver Club and VaChina have contributed their own revisions to the script. In the 2022 production of TVM by VaChina, actors were encouraged to write down their experiences and incorporate them into the script. The original version of the play depicts the life experiences of American women in a manner that is unrealistic and idealised. Given that it is a utopian carnival with prominent exotic characteristics the original play might have

resonated well enough with audiences in universities or cities but not as much in rural regions or among migrant worker groups. Therefore, Chinese versions of TVM are not direct translations but rather an artistic process of re-creation. These adaptations reflect China's reality, making them more powerful than the original in this specific social context and more likely to resonate with the local audience.

Institutional censorship

Unlike during the Cultural Revolution, theatre productions in contemporary China are not subject to a rigid ban on the screening or filming of a particular subject like film and television productions. Rather than outright bans on specific subjects, censorship operates on a smaller, localized scale. Performances like TVM might still take place in private venues such as bars or coffee shops, even if banned in commercial theatres. According to the interviewees, venue managers often perform initial censorship of scripts or topics, and only in more extreme cases does the government intervene directly. This pattern is illustrated by Interviewee A's experience, where police blocked entry to a performance at Shanghai University, showing how censorship, while not always present, can appear suddenly and disruptively (Appendix, p.59).

However, government involvement in artistic performances does not always occur visibly or directly during the performance itself. Instead, the mechanisms of control are often indirect, aligning with Michel Foucault's concept that power functions through the establishment of norms and pervasive surveillance rather than explicit, forceful intervention (1975, pp.170–194). This delayed intervention underscores how censorship operates on multiple levels beyond immediate suppression; it seeks to prevent the emergence of dissenting ideas that could eventually disrupt social order. By carefully tracking the audience's response and public conversations surrounding a play, authorities gauge whether the performance has sparked a broader ideological shift or inspired critical discourse that might contribute to collective dissent. Rather than overtly halting a performance, authorities rely on retrospective control to identify and mitigate potential risks. This strategy of latent censorship effectively extends the reach of state power, creating an atmosphere where performers and audiences alike may become more cautious in their expressions and reactions, fearing the potential repercussions of government scrutiny.

On August 2, 2013, the Beijing Municipal Bureau of Culture issued "Opinions on Service Management Work of Further Regulating Small Theatre Performances" (*Guanyu jinyibu guifan dui xiaojuchang yanchu huodong fuwu guanli gongzuo de yijian* 关于进一步规范对小剧场演出活动服务管理工作的意见), jointly drafted by two other departments, demanding that each district assemble a team of social workers to censor small-scale theatre (Beijing Municipal Bureau of Culture, 2013). The announcement did not provide specific guidance on what constitutes problematic plays but instead listed ten situations that were outlined in 1997 in the "Regulations on the Administration of Commercial Performances" (*Yingyexing yanchu guanli tiaoli* 营业性演出管理条例), including endangering national unity, sovereignty, and territorial integrity; endangering national security; harming national honour and interests; disturbing social order; undermining social stability; and promoting obscenity, pornography, heresy, superstition, or violence (The State Council of the PRC, 1997). This type of on-site censorship resulted in the cancellation of the follow-up performance of the play *An Enemy of the People* by the German Schaubühne Theatre Company in 2018 after its premiere on 6 September because, on the day of the premiere, the audience was found shouting out "We want free speech" and "Here, too, people are exterminated" during the interaction with the actors (Ye, 2018).

The interviews highlight how the government's censorship strategy specifically targets feminist voices. Rather than using outright bans, censorship often occurs on digital platforms where feminist activism has a presence. For instance, Interviewee C described how content related to TVM was often shadow-banned or restricted on social media platforms like WeChat and Weibo, making it hard for followers to see (Appendix, p.69). This reflects the numerous challenges that productions like TVM and groups like Zhiheshe face. As China's stringent internet censorship regime continues to evolve and tighten, administrators frequently engage in the removal of content posted by Zhiheshe on widely-used public platforms such as their WeChat official account and Weibo, often referred to as China's equivalent of Twitter. The content, if not entirely deleted, frequently faces limitations or shadow banning, a practice where the visibility of posts is intentionally reduced due to the inclusion of sensitive terms such as "vagina" and "feminism" (Appendix, p.65; p.70). This systematic suppression of content underscores the government's commitment to controlling narratives and maintaining strict oversight over public discourse. The choice to target feminist voices in this subtle yet systematic manner is indicative of the

government's recognition of the potency of feminist activism in challenging established norms and advocating for gender equality. By suppressing these voices, the authorities aim to prevent the dissemination of feminist ideas and limit their influence, all while avoiding the international scrutiny that overt censorship might attract. This approach has the effect of rendering feminist activists and their causes less visible within the public sphere, making it increasingly challenging for feminist movements to gain momentum and effect meaningful change.

In addition, institutional restrictions also reduce feminists' opportunities to have their voices heard. As a feminist student organisation, Zhiheshe faced rigorous funding difficulties, which is also mirrored in the activity of LGBTQ and feminist NGOs. Due to the paucity of information on the specific process of funding approval within the university, the discussion will use China's NGO funding policy as a broader illustration of this institutional restriction. Legislation enacted by the government makes funds less accessible to the feminist community, which fundamentally and technically restricts the development space of these organisations, and also reduces the chances for feminist theatre productions.

For a student organisation like Zhiheshe, acquiring funds from non-governmental sources is nearly impossible. According to the interviewees, aside from the 2005 performance, which was sponsored by Durex, they were unable to secure any sponsorship, even during the years in which the interviewee participated in the performance (Appendix, p.57; p.64). Most of their performance expenses had to be covered by the members themselves. This was not only due to the difficulty of attracting sponsors but also because of the institutional restrictions placed on feminist NGOs in China. The primary challenge faced by NGOs in China is obtaining adequate funding. There are too few resources and limited diversity in funding options for feminist groups.

In the context of the 1995 World Conference on Women held in China, gender issues were allocated more resources than other social concerns, but the weakness of this seemingly privileged beginning is that the awareness of gender issues in the social context at that time did not result from spontaneous progress within society but rather from the official conference. It means that even if the World Women's Conference provided a place for people to gather, making it possible for those with awareness

to take action, the support these people were able to receive was simply to reach out to international institutions and organisations such as the Ford Foundation and Oxfam (Wang, L., personal communication, 2019). From 1995 to 2019, no major new enterprise possessed sufficient gender awareness and willingness to engage in long-term collaboration with gender-related NGOs in China (Wang, 2019). By 2014, whether it was Ford or Oxfam, the total amount of funds had decreased; also around this time, the public fundraising model based on the internet was becoming more and more important; however, the majority of feminist organisations failed to establish the vision, technology, and capacity for public fundraising, with the exception of a few LGBTQ organisations with clear service aims and superior mobilisation capabilities, such as PFLAG China. Nevertheless, there is another reason for this incapability: if there were additional financial resources available during the development of the NGO, one or two professional fundraisers could be directly hired to manage the still-growing form of public fundraising.

A persistent issue for feminist organisations, including Zhiheshe, is the question of legitimacy. Although Zhiheshe operated within Fudan University, this affiliation did not guarantee external financial support unless endorsed by the university itself. Interviewee A noted that Zhiheshe was unable to seek independent sponsorship due to strict university regulations (Appendix, p.57). This mirrors the struggles of many feminist NGOs that face similar hurdles in maintaining legitimacy and accessing stable resources. Bourdieu's idea of "cultural capital" is useful here, as the institutional affiliation provides limited legitimacy but not enough to fully support feminist initiatives financially. This reflects the broader societal and institutional mechanisms that work to constrain feminist movements by denying them the necessary economic and symbolic capital to sustain their efforts.

When speaking of NGOs in Mainland China, it usually includes foundations, private non-enterprise entities, and social groups, and all three can be registered with the Civil Administration Bureau. However, most feminist organisations in China are not officially registered. In order to be an NGO on the Mainland, one must either register with the Civil Administration Bureau as a private non-enterprise entity or register with the State Administration for Industry and Commerce in the name of a company while still operating as an NGO. The third option is to remain unregistered. If organisation members have their own connections, they can associate the organisation with official institutions, such as the

Anti-Domestic Violence Network, associated with the China Law Society upon its establishment, but such a special tie is apparently quite uncommon among NGOs. If the organisation is registered with the Bureau of Civil Administration, its funding sources will be reasonably stable: foundations, government procurement of services, external fundraising through public platforms, etc.

However, for a feminist NGO, these routes are not as convenient as they seem; for instance, there are few foundations and projects willing to sponsor feminists. Aside from that, as a result of the 1995 World Women's Conference, the connections of gender institutions are overly concentrated in overseas funds, and as a result of the adjustment to the foreign exchange management policy in 2010 (The Central Government of PRC, 2010) and new restrictions on overseas NGOs established in 2016 (Lin, 2016), it became increasingly difficult for overseas funds to enter, and accepting foreign capital would also bring identity authority and legitimacy issues to feminist organisations.

If the group files as a company, it will have very limited possibilities of receiving funding, as the majority of foundations only provide grants to private, non-profit entities registered with the Civil Administration Bureau. At the same time, despite the fact that commercial registration might release an organisation from various limits on funding channels, it imposes additional obstacles on project execution and collaboration. For instance, when the China Law Society no longer accepted the affiliation of the Anti-domestic Violence Network, this organisation went through business registration and changed its name to Beijing Fanbao Co., Ltd., and its further cooperation with the public prosecutors and the police started to face more obstacles.

Finally, if an NGO does not register prior to conducting activities, the odds of being regulated are quite high; it will be remarkably difficult for the organisation to collaborate with a third party, and the requirements from foundation and project applications will be much stricter, as is the case with Zhiheshe. Zhiheshe, as a student association, is neither a private non-enterprise venture nor a company operating in the name of a company registered with the Industrial and Commercial Bureau. Therefore, the standards they must meet for funding and project applications are more stringent than those for legitimate NGOs, making it almost impossible for them to receive official funding as well.

These institutional constraints also impacted Zhiheshe's ability to promote their productions. Initially, their advertising was limited to posters within the university, and although social media provided new opportunities, stringent internet censorship significantly hindered large-scale promotion of sensitive topics like TVM. Interviewee C described how their WeChat posts were often limited in visibility, despite the play's relevance to gender issues (Appendix, p.68). This online suppression illustrates how feminist messages were curtailed, further limiting their outreach and resonance with wider audiences.

As interviewee C stated, "We must first consider how to ensure the survival of this play instead of the influence of it" (Appendix, p.68). On the one hand, they could not advertise in places other than campus because it is illegal to put up posters on the street, and members of the community could not afford legal public advertising; on the other hand, they had to control the number of people who saw the poster during the promotion process to prevent the show from being cancelled due to excessive publicity. The audience group is managed within the context of a particular community, namely, people with certain relations to Fudan University, which makes most of the audience highly educated students and their parents, teachers, or individuals with a particular interest in and understanding of gender issues and feminism. This is a double-edged sword that allows the performance to be carried out relatively safely but also restricts the performance's topicality and prevents it from expanding its societal influence. Clearly, this is one of the purposes of governmental censorship. By restricting funding sources and tightening the requirements for feminist NGOs to achieve legal status, making the work extremely difficult for feminists, the Chinese government has constrained their living space and ability to grow in influence.

Interestingly, direct censorship from Fudan University was less frequent than one might anticipate, a fact that both Interviewee A and B pointed out. One possible reason for this is the presence of an established gender studies department at Fudan, where many faculty members have been exposed to international feminist discourses through their overseas education. These professors may have played a subtle role in fostering an environment more tolerant of feminist ideas and performances like TVM (Appendix, pp. 58-59; p.63).

The situation at Fudan University does not apply to most universities in China. For example, TVM did

not do as well at Shanghai University in 2006 when invited by a professor from the Department of Sociology because according to the interviewees, even though the production was a success, police cars blocked the entrance to Shanghai University during the performance, preventing outsiders from entering the campus; additionally, the leaders of Shanghai University came to the scene, and according to Interviewee A, “They watched for a while. The scene was about comfort women during World War II, which was politically correct, so they left in the middle of it. We were fortunate that they came and left at the ‘perfect timing’ because the following scene was about sexual pleasure and moaning, which could be significantly more sensitive” (Appendix, p.58). Shanghai University then requested that the teacher who invited the ensemble declare that the performance was solely a teaching activity and that they were simply attending a seminar to engage with the class. Students who attended the performance were also required to present student identification cards so the university could keep track of the audience.

Even at Fudan University, where many professors understood and supported the objectives of TVM, challenges still arose. Interviewees noted that faculty repeatedly cautioned ensemble members not out of personal disapproval but out of concern for the possible repercussions from higher authorities (Appendix, p.58). The warnings were primarily aimed at keeping the production discreet and avoiding unnecessary attention, highlighting the precarious balance between academic freedom and political sensitivity in China.

Like everyone in Chinese society, academic institutions like Fudan University operate under constant watch from both societal and governmental authorities. This climate of tight control is perfectly illustrated by Shanghai University’s insistence that the TVM team call their performance a “teaching activity.” The university’s cautious approach to handling sensitive content reflects just how wary institutions are of stepping over any political line. While individual professors may have had no problem with the play’s content, the institution as a whole was hyper-aware of the risks that could come with openly endorsing such material. Labelling the TVM performance as a “seminar” implied that the opinions it presented were subject to debate and discussion, effectively absolving the university of any responsibility for the views expressed in the play. In contrast, designating it as a “performance” carried the implication of endorsement or assertion, a potentially risky stance given the potential

sensitivity of the material and the risk of generating substantial public discussion and scrutiny. The university, like many others in China, chose the path of caution, with the primary objective being to "stay out of trouble" (Appendix, p.58). Academic institutions like Fudan University confront difficulties in balancing government inspection, public expectations, and academic independence while sponsoring performances such as TVM. Even if some university employees might have agreed with the play's objectives, the school tried to be cautious in order to maintain its reputation and prevent being accused of collusion by the authorities. These conditions highlight the delicate balancing act that Chinese educational institutions have to do when handling divisive material in a strictly regulated setting.

Thus, censorship serves not only to avert immediate disruptions during the event but also as a pre-emptive tool to neutralize the potential for organized resistance. It underscores the state's intent to maintain a stable social order by intervening in the cultural sphere subtly and strategically, anticipating and suppressing any nascent collective action. This form of power operates through an omnipresent surveillance that normalizes self-censorship among artists and audiences, encouraging conformity to the dominant discourse. Consequently, the control over artistic expression extends beyond the theater, reinforcing a broader social stability by quietly deterring subversive or politically charged discussions that may arise from a play's themes or messages. This form of retrospective censorship illustrates how modern governance uses the arts as a medium to exercise power, not just through outright prohibition but through the strategic shaping of public discourse and collective consciousness.

Public censorship

Zhiheshe's work was severely restricted by public censorship, which frequently imitated state censorship but came from private citizens. Interviewees described instances of vandalism of posters and online harassment, especially after 2013 when feminist issues started to receive more attention (Appendix, p.66). As Interviewee B noted, the harassment came not only from men but also from peers who saw feminism as a challenge to social norms. Another significant event that happened in 2013 is that before a theatre group from Beijing Foreign Studies University performed TVM, the Gender Action Group of BFSU, as the organiser of the performance, published a series of photographs titled

"My vagina says" (*Wode yindao shuo* 我的阴道说) on its homepage. In these photographs, participants in the play held up cards with slogans such as "My vagina says: I can let in anybody I want" and other similarly provocative statements (Wang, 2013). The photographs rapidly dominated social media headlines and became a widely discussed controversial topic (Wang, 2013). Eventually, these girls became victims of online violence too.

The central issue extends beyond whether online harassment is directly instigated by the government; it lies in how the government creates an environment where every citizen becomes an enforcer of censorship. As Interviewee B noted, many insults aimed at Zhiheshe's members revolved around accusations of "Westernized" thinking, with online users framing feminist advocacy as foreign interference (Appendix, p.63). This phenomenon illustrates Judith Butler's concept of "performativity," where the repetition of gendered and nationalist norms enforces social behaviour. Public censorship, driven by these ingrained societal expectations, becomes a tool for maintaining both national identity and gender hierarchies. An illuminating analysis of mainland Chinese language reports by Qian Gang, a scholar from the University of Hong Kong, on August 21, 2013, the General Political Department of the PLA issued a notice to study and implement the 819 Speech, stating that Xi Jinping addressed a series of major issues, including "positive propaganda and public opinion struggle" (Zhengmian xuanchuan he yulun douzheng 正面宣传和舆论斗争) (Qian, 2013).

Under the guidance of the central government, there has been a deliberate push to foster a new generation of fervent nationalists. This has resulted in individuals who voluntarily undertake the role of pervasive, spontaneous censors, policing public discourse and opinions in line with government-sanctioned narratives. In this context, the banning of TVM by Zhiheshe is directly linked to public censorship. According to the interviewees, in 2018, a student at the university observed the posters advertising the performance and raised a complaint with the university's administration committee (Appendix, p.63). The complaint alleged that the planned performance contained "inappropriate" content, such as discussions of homosexuality and feminism, which were perceived as potentially inciting a dangerous crowd gathering (Appendix, p.62). This incident underscores how the government's influence on public discourse encourages individuals to take it upon themselves to

enforce censorship in various forms, ranging from formal complaints to informal social policing.

The government's influence on the arts and censorship extends beyond the initial approval or banning of a performance. It also involves on-site monitoring by government theatre censors. These censors must not only evaluate the content of rehearsals but also anticipate how diverse audiences might react. This is a challenging task given that audience members have varying perspectives and expectations. In many cases, censorship decisions are made in response to the reactions of specific audience members. For instance, one of the interviewees mentioned a case involving Sun Yat-sen University's production of TVM. After two highly successful performances in 2013, each selling 400 tickets, they were invited to perform at other universities by professors (Appendix, p.62). However, these invitations were eventually revoked because, according to the censors' perspective, the success of the production gave it too much potential influence. This illustrates how censorship decisions are often driven by concerns about the perceived impact of performance on audiences and society at large.

The interplay between government guidance, public censorship, and artistic expression in China is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. It demonstrates how government influence permeates various aspects of public life and encourages individuals to actively participate in enforcing censorship, thereby shaping the discourse and cultural landscape in alignment with state-sanctioned narratives and values. Analysing how censorship was implemented reveals that although sensitive content receives more attention from censors, the focus of the ban is actually on collective activities; the silencing strategy of censorship is not to make everyone unable to speak but to make what is said less likely to be heard or paid attention to. By fostering a culture where both the government and citizens act as censors, China's approach to managing public discourse ensures that feminist theatre like TVM remains marginal, unable to challenge dominant narratives effectively. The pressure to self-regulate, coupled with public surveillance, creates a highly restrictive environment for feminist expression.

This is also consistent with the conclusions Harvard scholars drew from quantitative research on Chinese social media in 2013: that even though government policies look as bad as politicians themselves appear to recognise, this does not threaten their hold on power so long as they manage to eliminate discussions associated with events that have the potential to carry out collective actions —

where a locus of power and control, other than the government, influences the behaviours of masses of Chinese citizens (King, Pan & Roberts, 2013, pp.330-331). Regarding this form of expression, the Chinese people may feel individually free but collectively oppressed. In this instance, it is not difficult to comprehend why feminist theatre is a constant source of alarm for censors. This is partially due to the fact that the physical presence of live performance offers it an immediacy that the written word lacks: the performers are in the same room as the audience. As the action onstage can have a powerful, visceral impact, censors may fear that a performance could inspire audience members to engage in "corrupt" behaviour. The fact that theatre is viewed collectively in public only exacerbates these worries. The possibility of a spontaneous community response poses a threat to an authoritarian regime like China that wants to atomise dissent, and censors may be concerned that a theatrical performance may incite public disturbance. These concerns explain why, in some instances and situations, Chinese censors have granted authorisation for feminist productions only on the condition that the number and composition of their audience be limited.

Self-censorship

In the face of rigorous and often ambiguous restrictions, feminist theatre practitioners in China are compelled to engage in self-censorship as a means of ensuring their productions can be staged. The explanation provided by Interviewee C of the reasons for this self-censorship is especially insightful. It is clear from their actions that they are not motivated by aesthetic concerns or a desire to spare people's feelings. Rather, the main driving force is a sincere fear of harm and reprisals. In China, censorship can have serious, far-reaching effects (Appendix, p.65; p.69).

The Chinese censorship system is characterized by its ambiguity, which adds a layer of complexity to the decision-making process for practitioners. The severity of potential consequences is contingent not only on the scope of a work's transmission and its societal influence but also, to a significant extent, on luck. An illustrative example is the TVM performance at Shanghai University. In this case, the performance managed to avoid serious repercussions because the content aligned with politically correct material encountered by university personnel. For less influential works or those that fail to meet censorship requirements, the consequences can range from a ban on the performance to participants receiving a verbal warning. While a verbal warning may not sound particularly

intimidating, it is essential to recognize that within the broader context of the Chinese censorship apparatus, it serves as a warning sign and a reminder of the potential consequences for those who deviate from established norms.

Interviewee C emphasizes the harsh consequences that feminist activists, like The Feminist Five (Nvquan wu jiemei 女权五姐妹), must endure (Appendix, p.71). From 2009 to 2015, this group of five Chinese feminists used protests through performance art to raise awareness of gender inequality. On March 6, 2015, as they prepared to demonstrate against sexual harassment on public transit, their activism came to a head and they were arrested. The Feminist Five were eventually freed, but not before coming under constant government scrutiny and suffering consequences. Even though these extreme situations are uncommon, they constantly loom over feminist theatre practitioners. Because of this constant risk, people are always worried about whether a show will be cancelled or if its content will cause personal problems for the people involved. In the work of feminist theatre, the spectre of possible repercussions becomes a constant companion, acting as a sharp reminder of the dangers and difficulties that come with questioning social norms and promoting gender equality in the complicated context of Chinese censorship. It is reasonable to conclude, then, that self-censorship in Chinese feminist theatre is a reaction to the reality of working under a highly controlled and opaque censorship system rather than a choice. A persistent shadow is cast over the creative process by the fear of government retaliation and the threat of dire consequences, as demonstrated by cases such as The Feminist Five. This fear shapes the choices and actions of practitioners in their pursuit of social change and gender equality.

Regarding self-censorship, the interviewees highlighted three sensitive subjects. The first thing is that in order to avoid being labelled as serving “Western culture” or “hostile foreign forces,” interviewees B and C claimed that (Appendix, p.63; p.71), in 2013 and 2015, they drastically reduced the amount of English vocabulary in the script and avoided mentioning the American background of this play during the promotion phase. This was demonstrated differently in interviewee A’s statement: in 2006, the ensembles emphasised the production’s western background to gain approval from the university and draw audiences. For instance, in the 2006 version of TVM, the English name of the play

and its connection to the V-day movement were prominently displayed on posters. In the 2013 and 2015 versions, however, neither the English name nor the V-day movement were mentioned. According to B, nobody forced them to do so, but their instructor suggested that it would help them "protect themselves" because these introductions to Western backgrounds could be used to attack Zhiheshe's political stances (although this did not entirely prevent Zhiheshe from being labelled "westernised" or "treasonous"). This negative attitude towards the Western background, even though it is not explicitly stated in theatre legislation, can be perceived by taking a look at the prohibition of film and television and other fields. After Xi Jinping came to power in 2012, the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television of China (SARFT) (2014) promulgated that overseas TV shows must register their introduction plan and content on the "Online overseas film and television import information unified registration platform" (*Wangshangjingwai yingshiju yinjin xinxi tongyi dengji pingtai* 网上境外影视剧引进信息统一登记平台); and the "Notice on further restrictions on the import of foreign films and television management" (*Guanyu jinyibu luoshi wangshang jingwai yingshiju guanli youguan guiding de tongzhi* 关于进一步落实网上境外影视剧管理有关规定的通知), tightening the control of film and television works with overseas backgrounds in the name of preventing cultural intrusion (2014).

This shift, which is consistent with the ambivalence of the China Communist Party's foreign policy, has made the situation of feminist plays even more challenging. Chinese cultural statecraft and foreign policy are intricately intertwined, responding to a complex interplay of domestic and international factors. As many observers have noted, identity is often constructed in relation to an imagined "other" (Neumann, 1996; Hopf, 2005; Callahan, 2015), and in this context, the perceived "other" is the "West," which is often portrayed as a threat due to its promotion of universal values that challenge the Chinese Communist Party's ideology. The act of cultural statecraft involves the selective construction of cultural and civilizational themes deemed essential not only to shaping national identity but also to ensuring the security and stability of the regime. As highlighted in Chapter 1, Chinese feminists have often been seen as having an imported nature and have been criticized for appearing to prioritize class and urban privileges. Some critiques suggest that their uncritical embrace of Euro-American white, middle-class feminism aligns with the goals of neoliberal capitalism. This perspective argues that an

emphasis on individual “choice,” “empowerment,” and “voice” among urban, affluent young women can inadvertently overlook structural inequality and economic redistribution issues.

In the past, the presence of “American award-winning productions” provided a degree of shelter for feminist plays like TVM in China. However, as China’s foreign policy takes on more nationalist inclinations, this shelter has become less secure. The government’s growing emphasis on preserving and promoting a distinct Chinese identity and culture has led to increased scrutiny of cultural productions that may be perceived as overly influenced by Western ideologies. Consequently, the living space for feminist theatre in China has faced growing constraints. The confluence of shifting foreign policy heightened nationalism, and the critiques of certain feminist perspectives have created a challenging environment for feminist theatre practitioners. They must navigate not only the usual challenges associated with censorship but also an evolving socio-political landscape that increasingly scrutinizes their work through the lens of cultural authenticity and national identity.

Another sensitive term avoided in 2015’s production was patriarchy (*fuquan* 父权), echoing the self-depoliticization of feminists discussed in Chapter 1. However, the alterations in the script extend beyond mere linguistic shifts. They also reflect changes in the thematic focus of the play. In the 2006 and 2013 editions of TVM, there were still some veiled critiques of the patriarchal social structure. For example, in the introduction scene, characters sarcastically chanted Confucian dogmas like “men are superior to women” (Nan zun nv bei 男尊女卑) without making direct comments. In the scene addressing sexual assault, the victim character listed a range of sex offenders, implying a systemic critique of gender oppression within society. In the 2015 version of the script, however, these “offensive” contents aimed at critiquing aspects of male dominance and gender oppression were removed.

The accusations against perpetrators were recontextualized to focus solely on the private sphere—individuals rather than society or male groups. For example, the scene titled “Sex Workers” underwent significant alteration. In earlier versions, one character explained that she turned to prostitution due to poverty and a lack of alternatives. However, in the 2015 version, the script was modified to depict the

character as being forced into prostitution by her father. This change shifts the narrative from a broader societal issue related to class disparities and the objectification of women to a more individualized struggle. This change reflects the pervasive influence of what Judith Butler refers to as "the politics of dispossession"—the idea that marginalized groups, when deprived of structural power, are compelled to reframe their resistance within the parameters allowed by the dominant discourse. In this case, feminist theatre practitioners in China redefined their narratives in ways that could bypass state scrutiny, choosing personal struggles over collective critique.

According to interviewee C (Appendix, p.71), the emergence of such changes is related to the arrest of The Feminist Five in 2015. After seeing the news about The Feminist Five, they realised that the public space for feminists had been further reduced, so they made such changes for personal safety and for the continuation of the show. It demonstrates that when the Chinese government suppressed socially unstable factors to maintain the stability of the society, females, as outsiders in the patriarchal society, were actually excluded from the public space. Since 1997, there had always been at least one female Politburo member, and briefly two. A quota system required at least one woman in senior leadership at each level below that, contributing a small but steady stream of candidates (Graham-Harrison, 2022); however, after the closing of the 20th Communist party congress in Beijing, the new all-male line-up was revealed the day Xi formally extended his rule for a further five years (Graham-Harrison, 2022). This retrogression of women's rights has already begun to take shape before this. In 2013, Xi Jinping proposed to "give full play to the unique role of women in promoting the family virtues of the Chinese nation and establishing a good family tradition" (The Central Government of PRC, 2013), which undoubtedly re-emphasizes the social role of women as good wives and good mothers, and once again drives women from the public space back to the private sphere within the family, pushing women even further away from power in Xi's China. Therefore, through self-censorship and self-depoliticization to prove that they pose no threat to social stability and the Communist Party's rule, it has become a last resort for feminist theatre practitioners to seek living space.

The self-censorship in feminist theatre shifts the focus from structural power imbalances to individual problems, encouraging individuals to view personal struggles as isolated issues rather than symptoms

of larger societal forces. In this context, feminist performances like TVM are pressured to remove systemic critiques of patriarchy and focus on personal stories of struggle and resilience, aligning with the state's desire to frame social issues as personal challenges rather than political problems. By depoliticizing their narratives, feminist theatre practitioners distance their work from critiques of power structures, which reduces the likelihood of censorship but also dilutes the broader political impact of their performances. This shift mirrors the state's strategy of using therapeutic rhetoric to neutralize potential dissent by diverting attention from systemic inequality to individual self-improvement.

Alongside previously mentioned avoided topics, Western influence and the critique of patriarchy, the topic of "obscenity" presents another layer of complexity and restriction within feminist theatre productions in China. In 2008, SARFT issued an official proclamation that explicitly prohibited cinematic portrayals of homosexuality. However, in 2010, SARFT repealed this notification without clear indications of whether the prohibition had been entirely lifted. This inconsistency left the status of queer content in a state of uncertainty within the realm of Chinese cinema and the arts.

In 2013, Fan Popo, an independent Chinese queer filmmaker, sought transparency by filing a request with the film bureau for the "Disclosure of Information" regarding the regulatory laws governing queer content (Wei, 2020, p.14). In response, the bureau conveyed that by repealing the regulation that explicitly prohibited homosexuality on-screen, the provision effectively reverted to a previous-century prohibition on all forms of "obscene" visual imagery. Crucially, what qualifies as "obscene" remains a matter of interpretation by the regulatory agency, as there is no precise definition provided in the official guidelines. For feminist theatre, this ambiguity creates ongoing tension. Themes of sexuality, especially those related to LGBTQ+ issues, are often considered taboo, and the threat of being labelled "obscene" hangs over productions like TVM. As a result, practitioners have employed strategies such as the use of scientific language and humour to navigate these restrictions, as seen in the creative choices made by Zhiheshe. However, these strategies are not foolproof, as evidenced by the eventual banning of the play in 2018, demonstrating that even carefully moderated performances are vulnerable to censorship.

Broadly speaking, within the framework of Chinese censorship, content that falls under the category of "obscene" typically includes pornography, violence, and homosexuality. This classification reflects the conservative and often traditional values upheld by Chinese authorities regarding matters of sexuality and public expression. The ambiguity surrounding what constitutes obscenity creates significant challenges for artists and theatre practitioners who seek to address issues related to sexuality, including LGBTQ+ themes, in their work. This uncertainty places creative endeavours under constant scrutiny, as artists must navigate the ever-shifting boundaries of acceptability in their pursuit of artistic expression.

Zhiheshe has persistently refused to completely give up on touchy subjects in spite of these difficulties, understanding that doing so would undermine TVM's core principles and message. Rather, they have made adjustments by utilizing innovative techniques to get around censorship without compromising the play's integrity. Interviewee C brought up one such tactic, explaining that the group talked about topics like menstruation, masturbation, and sexually transmitted infections using scientific language. This method helped to place the conversation within a more socially acceptable framework of health and education, which helped to lessen the perceived sensitivity of the subject matter (Appendix, p.65). However, the fact that even scientific language is not entirely immune to censorship, as evident in the play's prohibition in 2018, underscores the continuous hurdles that artists and theatre groups in China face in their pursuit of unfettered artistic expression.

In the scene known as "Moaning," a segment particularly susceptible to accusations of obscenity, Zhiheshe employed a clever theatrical device known as cross-talk. This allowed them to inject humour and comedic elements into the scene, which not only served to balance and neutralize the potentially sexual aspects of the topic but also resonated with audiences, breaking down societal taboos and stereotypes. The introduction of absurd and blatantly sarcastic ways of moaning not only destigmatized the act itself but also reduced the risk of being charged with obscenity to some extent.

Another interesting facet of Zhiheshe's journey is that their production of TVM has retained its original name throughout its impressive 13-year run. However, interviewee C revealed that other theatre groups that have staged TVM have had to grapple with the necessity of changing the title at some point due

to censorship pressures. For instance, the Beaver Club changed the title of the play to “Overcast to Cloudy” (Yin dao duoyun 阴 dao 多云); the Peking University theatre club changed its name to “Her Monologues” (Ta dubai 她独白); and the Beijing Foreign Studies University theatre club changed its name to “V Monologues” (V dubai V 独白), because the inclusion of the word “vagina” in the title invites more scrutiny for this play (Appendix, p.70).

Zhiheshe’s unwavering resilience and their creative approach to self-censorship serve as a microcosm of the larger challenges encountered by feminist activists in a society where numerous topics are considered deeply taboo. Their experiences provide valuable insights into the intricate dance between artistic expression and state-imposed restrictions, reflecting a broader struggle faced by those seeking to challenge societal norms and advocate for women’s rights in contemporary China. In the larger context of China’s socio-political landscape, Zhiheshe’s journey underscores the multi-faceted implications of censorship.

Conclusion

This dissertation has provided a comprehensive insight into the intricate machinery of theatre censorship in China, revealing a three-dimensional mechanism that extends its reach beyond the stage. This multi-faceted apparatus of control encompasses not only in-person surveillance but also institutional censorship, which governs the flow of information and financial resources and complicates the process of legitimizing feminist organizations. All these facets of censorship ultimately converge to achieve the effective silencing of voices that challenge the established norms and authorities.

Institutional censorship plays a pivotal role in this mechanism, acting as a gatekeeper for information dissemination and funding access. By regulating the channels through which these groups can obtain resources, institutional censorship effectively restricts the scope of their activities and their capacity to promote feminist narratives. In the implementation of institutional censorship, the Chinese government focuses mostly on silencing the voice of feminists rather than issuing wide warnings or outright prohibitions with considerable fanfare. Government regulation not only eliminates information about feminist theatre but also makes financial resources less available to LGBTQ and feminist NGOs, which fundamentally and technically limits the growth space for these groups and so decreases the likelihood of feminist theatre productions. Apart from that, legitimacy concerns have also been a problem for feminist organisations. The government makes the registration process nearly impossible for feminist groups, which also makes it more difficult for them to gather and produce theatre works.

The institutional censors also tried to set up a fear of retaliation and injury to drive self-censorship. The severity of the possible outcome is affected not simply by the breadth of the work's transmission and the influence it has on society, but also by random chance. Failure to comply with censorship rules may result in the performance being prohibited and the participants receiving a verbal warning for less influential works, but going to jail is the worst-case scenario, regardless of how rare it is.

In Xi's era, Institutional censorship is handled on a smaller and more personal scale, with the

government not publishing a list of banned plays. Most censorship decisions are made by the venue or event organisers themselves, while central or local authorities very occasionally step in. The state or district authority only gets involved during and after a performance, when it sends censors to the theatre to watch the play and assess the audience's reaction and decide if it will have a negative influence. It also monitors public opinion on the internet to see if there is any significant unwanted influence.

Since the government's decision is highly dependent on the impact of the work and the audience's reaction, public censorship has also become an important measure in China. The government's patriotic indoctrination and the censorship system's growing complexity and power have inspired a new generation of fanatic nationalists as a network of pervasive, spontaneous censors. These individuals, acting as spontaneous censors, form a pervasive network that actively monitors and reports on activities perceived as challenging the established socio-political order. After the launch of a play, censors may make changes or impose restrictions based on the reactions of the specific audience. A close examination of the censoring process demonstrates that the focus of the restriction is on collective actions, even though sensitive content receives more attention from censors.

To navigate this challenging environment and gain some latitude for their creative works, feminist theatre artists have resorted to strategies aimed at reducing the sensitivity of their productions. This compromise, while serving as a survival tactic, comes at a cost—the potential dilution of the critical and transformative power of their productions. It was further illustrated that to gain more creative space, feminist theatre practitioners went through a route of self-de-politicisation. In Xi's era, the most controversial aspects of feminist theatre plays are Western cultural influences, criticism of patriarchy, and the use of language that directly refers to women's physiological terminology and sexual desire. Theatre practitioners try to sidestep these issues by localising the work during the creative stage and weakening the Western background at the promotion stage; in the script, the accusation of patriarchy turns to the personal accusation; and they recast female physiological vocabulary and desires as scientifically educational or comedic. In essence, the adoption of self-depoliticization as a survival strategy reflects the adaptability and resilience of feminist theatre practitioners in China. It enabled them to safeguard their creative space and gain greater legitimacy for their works within a highly regulated environment.

In light of the limitations discussed in the introduction chapter, particularly regarding the focus on Zhiheshe as a student organization, efforts were made to enhance the comprehensiveness and accuracy of the research findings. Recognizing that the interview results and research conclusions might not offer a complete picture of feminist NGOs and commercial theatre in China, different approaches were taken in the dissertation.

Firstly, a comprehensive literature review was conducted to supplement the insights gained from Zhiheshe's experiences. This allowed for a broader understanding of the broader landscape of feminist theatre in China, capturing a wider range of perspectives and practices.

Additionally, efforts were made to gather supplementary information from the interviewees about other theatre groups and feminist NGOs operating in China. This approach aimed to mitigate the risk of bias and enhance the study's applicability by incorporating diverse viewpoints and experiences.

Furthermore, when faced with a relatively small sample size, interviewees were asked detailed questions about their knowledge of other participants in the theatre productions. This approach aimed to bolster the reliability of the research findings by cross-referencing information and gaining a more comprehensive understanding of the context.

While these measures do not make the research outcomes universally applicable to every feminist production in China, they contribute to the accuracy and depth of the study. By incorporating diverse sources of information and triangulating data, the research strives to provide a more nuanced and representative portrayal of the challenges and strategies employed by feminist theatre practitioners in China. On the other hand, by addressing this research gap, it provides insights that shed light on the challenges and strategies faced by feminist theatre practitioners in navigating a censorious environment. To expand on the implications of this research and potential avenues for further exploration.

This study primarily focuses on Zhiheshe, yet future research could expand its scope to explore the

survival strategies and practices of other feminist NGOs and commercial theatre groups in China. By examining a broader spectrum of organizations, scholars could gain a more holistic understanding of the ways in which censorship impacts the feminist arts community throughout the country. This approach would offer valuable insights into the broader cultural and political forces at play, and how different feminist groups navigate the constraints imposed upon them.

Moreover, the research predominantly covers the period leading up to 2018, leaving the post-2018 censorship landscape relatively unexplored. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019 introduced a range of political and societal shifts, which likely had significant implications for censorship policies. Investigating how the censorship system has adapted to these changes, particularly in relation to feminist theatre and activism in the post-pandemic context, presents an important avenue for future inquiry. This could reveal new patterns of censorship and resistance that have emerged in response to the unique challenges of the pandemic era.

In addition, there is an opportunity to conduct a deeper examination of how censorship intersects with government-sponsored propaganda and state-funded theatre productions. Analyzing how these two mechanisms work together to shape public perceptions of women, and how they either reinforce or challenge prevailing societal norms, could offer significant insights into the dynamics of cultural control. Understanding this relationship is critical for examining the broader implications of state intervention in the cultural sector.

Finally, comparative studies could offer valuable perspectives by analyzing the experiences of feminist theatre in China alongside similar movements in other countries. Such studies would provide a broader context for understanding the common challenges faced by feminist artists globally and the strategies they employ to navigate political and cultural restrictions. This comparative approach could illuminate how different political systems, cultures, and censorship regimes influence feminist artistic expression and activism worldwide.

In conclusion, this study lays a foundation for understanding the complex relationship between feminist theatre and censorship in China. Further research in these suggested directions can contribute

to a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of censorship on artistic expression, feminist struggles, and gender discourse in contemporary China.

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Appendix

Interviewee A

Q: Can you please briefly introduce yourself to me?

A: 我是复旦大学知和社 2006 年的成员，在演出中担任过导演、编剧和演员的角色。

I was a member of Zhiheshe at Fudan University in 2006, and I have worked as a director, playwright and actress in the play.

Q: How was the audience composition (gender, career, etc.) for The Vagina Monologues when you were performing?

A: 大部分观众都是我们学校的学生，女性居多，男性虽然也有但大部分是陪女朋友来看演出的。

Most of the audience was students from our university. More girls than boys, and most of the boys were there with their girlfriends.

Q: Did you receive comments from the society on your public platform during the publicity phase before the performance? What did the comments say?

A: 2006 年的时候微博还没有现在这么火，微信也还不存在，关于演出的信息扩散方式基本就是口口相传。当时还挺流行用大学论坛的，论坛上的争议倒是挺多的。比如有些人觉得自己从这部戏中学到了以前不知道的关于性别和女权的知识，但也有些人觉得在舞台上重复"阴道"这个词是粗俗的。我记得还有人说，"我知道应该尊重阴道，但你没必要一遍又一遍地质问我"。

In 2006, Weibo wasn't as popular as it is now, and WeChat didn't even exist yet. Word-of-mouth was basically how we spread the word. At the time, most of the discussion took place on the university bulletin board system, and there were some controversies of course. For example, some people thought they learned much knowledge about feminism from the show that they didn't know before. In contrast, others thought it was vulgar to say the word "vagina" aloud, and I remember some said, "I know that vagina should be respected, but you don't have to confront the audience during the show."

Q: The Chinese version of The Vagina Monologues made many changes to the content compared to the original version. How did you choose the topics of social concern included in the script?

A: 我们剧本创作的传统就是大家坐下来一起聊，一起讲生活中发生的故事、从小到大的经历等等。我们会把身边的故事写进剧本，比如写性骚扰，原型就是以前经常在学校里骚扰学生的搭讪男。这样

的演出效果会比较好，尤其是复旦的女生就更感同身受。我还记得写”人流”这一幕的时候，就有人说了自己的朋友做人流的经历，并在此基础上再去采访一些人，把几个故事捏在一起写成了最终的剧本。

The way we wrote our scripts was that everyone sat down and talked to each other, sharing stories from our lives, from when we were kids to adult life and so on. Very often, we put our own stories into the script. For example, there was this “pick-up guy” who had been constantly harassing students at our campus, used as an example in the sexual harassment scene. This kind of story from personal experience was better related to by our audience, and especially the girls in the school were more empathetic. I still remember that when I was writing the abortion scene, someone told me about his friend’s experience with abortion. Based on this, we went to the campus and interviewed some girls, and then put together a few of their stories to make a script.

Q: What were the factors you needed to consider during the creative process of this play?

A: 当时真的没考虑那么多，只是觉得如果想要更贴近观众，我们就不能反反复复演出一部已经成型的剧本。我们是通过工作坊的形式来创作剧本的。如果说有什么需要考虑的因素的话，那最需要考虑的就是怎么省钱吧。当时我们所有的道具都是自己做的。排练教室不能用的时候，我们就去借老师的办公室。2005 年的时候还没那么难申请经费。听社团的前辈说当时我们还从避孕套品牌杜蕾斯那里拿到了赞助，但这种事情完全就是看运气，我们是不能主动越过学校去申请社会资金的，因为这样不合规矩。

In fact, we didn’t think about it that much at the time. However, we felt that if we wanted to connect more with the audience, we couldn’t hold ready-made scripts and perform them year after year. Instead, we started to make scripts through workshops. If there was anything to consider, it should be how to save money. At that time, we made all of the props ourselves. When we couldn’t use the rehearsal room, we sometimes had to borrow the teacher’s office. The funding situation was not so difficult in 2005. In that year, we got money from the condom brand Durex, but things like that are always a matter of luck. We couldn’t reach out for money from sources outside of the university by ourselves. It’s against the rules.

Q: What are the rules about funding you were facing?

A: 虽然作为学生社团，我们可以以学校的名义开展活动，但这也导致如果学校不批经费我们就没有其他经济来源。而且不光是我们学生社团面临经费的问题，很多非政府女权组织也都有类似的问题。我现在就在一个非政府女权组织工作，从我的经验来说，要想注册 NGO，你首先得跟民政部门注册

为私人非营利个体，或者是跟工商局注册为公司，以公司的名义做 NGO 的工作。或者你也可以选择不注册。还有一种情况是如果这个 NGO 的成员或负责人人脉够广的话，就可以挂名在一些官方组织的名下，这样活动是更方便的。但是这种人脉很少见。如果这个 NGO 以私人非盈利的名义向民政部注册，就可以申请更稳定的资金来源比如基金会、政府服务，或者在公共平台上争取外部自信。但是对于性别 NGO 来说，这些途径没有看上去那么简单，因为大部分的基金和项目都是不愿意资助女权团体的。尤其是在限制海外资金的政策出台之后，想要获得资金就更难了。我不记得这些政策具体是哪年出台的了，但是总之海外资金的流入是越来越难的。那些接受过海外资金的女权团体也要面临很多审查，涉及到身份和合法性的问题，还经常被指控为境外势力。另一方面，如果这个 NGO 以商业团体的名义注册，想获得投资就更难了，因为大部分基金会更愿意把钱给私人的、非盈利的团体。当然商业注册让活动更加自由，但同时也更难让项目获得审批。最后，如果这个 NGO 根本就不去注册，那它被管制的风险就会进一步提高，就像我们纸和社这个学生社团一样。未注册组织想要获得合法资金的挑战性也是更高的，这就让开展活动的难度变得更高了。

Although, as student associations, our activities are conducted in the name of the university, they are ineligible for external financial assistance if the university does not authorise any funding. Furthermore, it’s not just student societies facing funding issues, feminist NGOs have been having similar issues as well. I am working at a feminist NGO at the moment, and from what I have seen, in order to be an NGO, you must either register with the Civil Administration Bureau as a private non-enterprise entity or register with the State Administration for Industry and Commerce in the name of a company while still working as an NGO. You can also choose not to register at all. If members of an organisation have their own connections, they can link the organisation to official institutions. However, this kind of special tie is a rare privilege among NGOs. If the organisation is registered with the Bureau of Civil Administration, it will have stable means of funding, such as foundations, government procurement of services, external fundraising through public platforms, etc. But for a feminist NGO, these routes are not as easy as they seem because there are not many organisations and projects willing to fund them. Things got even more tricky after the release of new regulations on oversea fundings in, well I can’t remember the years vividly, but it got harder and harder for foreign money to come in, and feminist NGOs that accepted foreign money had problems with their identity, authority, and legitimacy. On the other hand, suppose the NGO registers as a business company. In that case, it won’t have many chances of getting funding since most foundations only give money to private, non-profit organisations registered with the Civil Administration Bureau. At the same time, commercial registration can free a group from some funding restrictions, but it can also make it harder to work together on projects and get things done.

Lastly, if an NGO doesn't register at all before doing activities, there is a higher chance for it to be regulated. It will be very hard for the organisation to work with a third party, and the requirements for foundation and project applications will be much stricter, just like with our student society Zhiheshe. The requirements for funding and project proposals are stricter than for legal NGOs, making it almost impossible for unregistered NGOs to get legal funding as well.

Q: Did you find the context in your play sensitive? In which aspect and why is it sensitive (or not)?
A: 当时真的没有想那么多。如果回过头去看的话，我觉得其实当时做的内容都挺敏感的，当时居然都能成功演出简直是难以置信的事情。当时虽然大家都不太了解性别相关的知识，但大部分人，至少是学校里的大部分人，都是愿意去听去学的。也可能是因为宣发阶段我们就说这是一部美国的获奖戏剧，所以大家走进剧场的时候是出于好奇，容忍度也更高。那时候很多人都觉得美国的生活方式和我们是截然不同的，所以也可以理解。尽管现在大家对性别议题的了解更多了，但社会氛围好像反而没有以前开放了。
At the time, it didn't seem like we gave it much thought. Looking back, I think that a lot of what we did in our show was pretty sensitive, and it's hard to believe that we were able to pull it off. At that time, most people didn't know much about gender studies, but most of them, at least within the university, were willing to listen and learn. Probably because during the publicity stage, we said that this was an award-winning play in the U.S., people were curious and quite tolerant when they came into the theatre. At that time, a lot of people thought the American lifestyle was different, which made it more understandable. Even though people are more aware of gender issues in general now, it seems like the atmosphere is not as open as it used to be.

Q: During the creative process, did you foresee any issues surrounding the possible censorship you might come across? What are these issues?
A: 我们最开始没有考虑过审查，因为大部分演出都在复旦进行，而我们的老师都非常非常支持。但我对一件事印象很深，当时上海大学社会学专业的一位老师邀请我们去他们学校演出。有一些学校领导在我们演出过程中来看了一会儿，他们看到的正好是慰安妇那一幕，非常政治正确，所以看了一会儿他们就走了。但事实上如果他们多待几分钟，下一幕就是呻吟，那我们可能就要惹麻烦了。另一件事情是我在那场演出结束后才知道的，我们演出过程中有警车堵住了上海大学的校门，阻止外人进入。还有演出结束以后，那个邀请我们的老师被学校要求声明我们的表演只是一次课堂教学活动，只是去和他的学生进行了一次课堂交流。去看演出的学生还被要求出示和记录他们的学生证。但像这样

的事情也只有那一次演出发生过。

We didn't think about censorship at first because most of the shows were in Fudan and our teachers were very supportive at the time. But I remember one thing that happened back then. A teacher at Shanghai University's Sociology Department invited us to put on a show at their university that year. Some administrative staff at Shanghai University showed up and watched for a while. The scene being put on when they were there was about comfort women during World War II, which was politically correct, so there wasn't a problem, and they left very soon. But in fact, the next scene was about moaning and sexual pleasure, but fortunately, they didn't see it. Another thing is that I didn't know until after the show that during the show, police cars came to block the school gate so that no one from the outside could get on campus. After the performance, the teacher who invited us was asked to declare that the performance was just a teaching activity of his class and that our crew only went to the classroom to communicate with the students. Students who saw the show had to sign in with their student ID cards. But that was the only time we experienced something like this.

Q: Did you make any adjustments to the play due to the censorship you came across? Why would this kind of adjustment solve the problem?

A: 我们对剧本作出的改动更多想要达到更好的演出效果，这么说你能懂我的意思吗？比如，还是在呻吟那一幕，我们用了很多不同的方法来达到搞笑的效果，因为如果效果太真实的话，观众可能会觉得不好意思，反而不容易让大家去思考戏剧的内容。这种改动并不是考虑到审查才做出来的。

The changes we made to how the audience reacted were more about achieving a better narrative and theatrical effect if you know what I mean. For example, in the moaning scene, we used different techniques to make it appear hilarious because if it looked too real, the audience might feel too embarrassed. It was not in consideration of any possible censorship.

Q: Producing a play can be pretty stressful. Other than the pressure from the schedule and rehearsing process, did anything else frustrate you or obstacle the play from being staged (peers, audience, university, government, etc.)?

A: 说到这个，我想起来在上海大学演出前的另一件事情。去之前复旦大学让我提供一个参加演出的学生名单，但是我说我不是负责人，最后这件事才不了了之了。我觉得学校担心的应该是校与校之间的串联，而不是戏里真正演了什么。换句话说，他们担心不同学校的学生发起大型活动。

Speaking of this, I remember another incident when we went to Shanghai University for the play. Before the

show, our school asked me to give them a list of the students who were going. I said I wasn't in charge, so the matter was dropped at last. I think they [the university] were more scared about the connections between universities than what happens in the play. In other words, they were more afraid of a large-scale movement put together by students from different universities.

Q: Have you considered the possible consequences of staging this play before the performance? What do you think this play would have on the audience?

A: 就像我前面说的，观众回家之后会在校园论坛上发表自己的意见。我们在演出之后其实会提供一个互动和提问的环节，有时候这个环节中甚至会发生直接的争吵。这有时也让我们能够思考和调整演出的内容，但我们并不是出于减少争议的目的而去调整的。当时我是认为，不管大家出于什么目的来看戏，不管引起了怎样的争论，至少这个性别话题是被人讨论的。我觉得讨论这个话题就已经足够了，因为至少人们注意到了以前从来没有注意过的东西。

As I said earlier when people went back, they expressed their opinions on the university's bulletin board system. Since we also offered a session after the show for the audience to interact and ask questions, there sometimes were even direct arguments. This made us think about and adjust the content of our performances sometimes, but I can't say that we changed things so as not to cause too much controversy. At the time, I believed that no matter why people came to the play in the first place, the outcome was sometimes that everyone had different ideas and argued, but they were at least talking about this topic. I think talking about it is good enough because it at least made people pay attention to things they had not seen or noticed before.

Q: What do you think of the ban on The Vagina Monologues in 2018?

A: 在它被正式禁演之前，我和我朋友讨论的时候就隐约有了点预感，但是我当时以为事情不会这么坏，因为毕竟不是 20 世纪了。当然最后事实证明就是可以这么坏。但我当时有预感是因为 2017 年各大女权平台就已经在陆续遭到封禁了，比如女权之声。让我很难过的一点是女权主义者们在父权社会里就像是抱团取暖，但现在连抱团取暖都需要勇气和智慧，因为父权国家显然不想看到女性集体的出现，正在尽可能去打压它。

Before it was officially banned, I talked about it with my friends and felt that something was about to happen, but I also thought things wouldn't be so bad because it wasn't the 20th century anymore. Of course, things really could be that bad, as it turned out. The reason why I saw it coming is that, in 2017, online platforms like Feminist Voices were shut down one by one. What makes me sad is that feminists in a patriarchal society are

like huddling together for warmth. Now, even huddling together for warmth takes a lot of guts and wisdom, because the patriarchal country does not want to see a community made of women and is trying desperately to suppress it.

Interviewee B

Q: Can you please briefly introduce yourself to me?

B: 我参加了知和社 2013 年的演出，并在这一年担任了导演和演员。

I participated in Zhiheshe's production in 2013, and worked as a director and actress that year.

Q: How was the composition of the audience (gender, career, etc.) for The Vagina Monologues when you were performing?

B: 大部分是学生和老师来看，也有一些学生的朋友，学生的家人，以及一些校外的对性别议题感兴趣的人。大部分都是女生去看的，也有少部分本身就是 LGBTQ 群体的男生。当时大家其实看到有男生来看一方面会觉得欣慰，还是有男性愿意去了解女性视角的，但同时也还是会有些紧张，因为我们的微信后台经常会收到男生的侮辱性私信和评论。

Most of the people who came were students and teachers at our university. Still, there were also friends and family members of students and people from outside the university interested in gender issues. Most of the audience were girls, but there were also a few boys who were part of the LGBTQ community. At the time, we were glad to see some men were willing to see things from the female's side but still a little nervous because men often sent insulting messages to our WeChat platform.

Q: What did the comments and messages say?

B: 如果说谩骂性的评论的话，有人说我们伤风败俗，也有人说我们哗众取宠；也有人打着理智讨论的旗号来宣泄自己的情绪，说我们不能只从女性的立场看待问题，应该推行的是平权而不是女权，就是那些拿平权当幌子想要驯化你的人，当时我们社团内部其实都会拿手机传着当笑话看。这种其实不太能伤害到我们的，我们比较担心的其实是来自平台方面的管控。比如微博和微信公众号其实是会限流的，有很多时候我们的浏览量根本和关注人数不成比例。我们互相拿手机测试过，这种时候往往是因为平台直接把我们发布的内容藏起来了，在微信首页和微博首页都刷新不出来我们发布的内容，只有点进账号里面才能看到。我觉得就是因为我们的标题和内容里面包含了诸如同性恋、女权和阴道这样的词汇。

So, there were nasty comments like calling us immoral and just craving attention. Others vented their emotions under the guise of rational discussions, saying that we shouldn't just look at things from women's point of view, but should support equal rights instead, you know, those people who use equal rights to get you to play the patriarchal game. At the time, we made jokes about these statements because this kind of thing didn't hurt us that much. The control from the platform was what concerned us a little bit. For example, Weibo and WeChat public accounts sometimes slowed us down. Many times, the number of page views did not match the number of our followers. We tried it on different phones and found that it was because the platform hid the content we posted, and the content we just posted couldn't be updated on the homepages of WeChat or Weibo. You could only see it if you click on our account page. I think it was because keywords like homosexuality, feminism, and vagina were in our titles and articles.

Q: Were there any other factors influencing the promotion of TVM?

B: 我们演出前会在学校里贴传单，但是经常会遇到有人把宣传单撕掉，或者是有人用马克笔把阴道这个词涂掉。我们当时也有一些接受采访或者是在网络上更大幅度宣传的机会，比如当时范坡坡还来参加过我们的工作坊，把我们排练的过程拍成了纪录片。现在想想那个时候的性别语境和现在比起来其实还是相对友好的。2013 年中山大学也演出了这部戏，由于情况太过火爆，他们去其他学校的演出最终被禁止了。而且社团前辈说，我们 2011 年的演出也是因为太火爆，甚至观众之间因为意见不统一而发生了肢体冲突。我们真的很担心这种事情再次发生，所以只要演出能正常进行就够了，大家其实已经不太会过多关注是否能让它更广为人知。

Before the shows, we put up flyers on campus, and it was quite common that people tore them up or crossed out the word "vagina" with markers. We had chances to be interviewed or get more attention on the Internet, like Fan Popo came to our rehearsal that year and made a documentary about how we practised. Now that I think about it, things were a lot friendlier back then than they are now. I heard that Sun Yat-Sen University also put on this play in 2013 and it was quite popular, but due to the heat, they were banned from performing in other universities. Senior members of our society also told me that Zhiheshe's performance of TVM went too popular in 2011, and people even got into fights because of disagreements. We got worried that something like that would happen again, so as long as the show could go on as usual, we didn't really care that much about getting the word out.

Q: I heard another interviewee saying that they emphasised that TVM is an award-winning American play,

wouldn’t that help with the promotion process if you put it on the posters?

B: 恰恰相反吧，我们其实宣传阶段尽量避免提起这部戏的美国背景，连它的英文名都没有写进海报里。不知道你有没有听说过 2013 年北京外国语学院的”我的阴道说”事件？当时就有人骂那些女生，说她们生活西化，说她们盲目崇拜西方的糟粕文化，还有骂得更难听的说她们是白人的性奴、哪怕走在路上被强奸也是活该的。当时因为北外的这个事情，我们后台评论收到的辱骂也更多了，很多都是从那件事情知道了我们社团，然后顺藤摸瓜地骂过来的。我们看到这些评论的时候又困惑又害怕，不能理解为什么有人能坏到这种程度。现在我想他们还是出于骨子里男性中心的蔑视和否认女性自由意志的文化。之后因为这件事情，老师找我们谈话，让我们改掉一些太过直白的表述，也删掉了和这部戏的美国背景相关的内容，包括和 V-day 相关的信息也删掉了。

On the contrary, we tried not to talk about the show’s American background while promoting it. Its English name wasn’t even put on the poster. I don’t know if you’ve heard about the My Vagina Says incident in 2013 at Beijing Foreign Studies University. At that time, those girls went through terrible online abuse. People said they were “Westernised” and worshipped white culture without question. Even worse, they were called “sex slaves to the white” and told they deserved to be raped when walking down the street. Because of what happened, we got more insults on social media. Many of the netizens learned about our society from that incident as well, tracked us down on the Internet, and then started abusing us. When I read these comments, I was super confused and scared. I didn’t understand how someone could be so cruel to them. Now I think these netizens were just those rooted in a male-centric culture of contempt and denial of women’s free will, but because of this, our teacher talked to us later and asked us to change some of the statements that were too straightforward. She also told us to get rid of the parts of the play related to its American background, like the information regarding V-Day.

Q: 你觉得老师跟你的谈话算是来自学校的审查吗？

B: 其实学校并没有对我们实施什么监管，老师跟我们谈话也是出于保护我们的目的。那位老师说学校本身对我们的演出是没有什么反对意见的，只是希望能不惹麻烦。因为几年前发生过一件事情，有人把演员在台上呻吟的场面录下来发到了网上，引来了很多的攻击，所以我们现在也不允许观众拍照录像了。

The school didn’t impose much supervision on us, and the teacher talked to us for the sake of protecting us. The teacher said that the university had nothing against our performances, just wanted to stay out of trouble. Also because of an incident a few years ago where someone recorded the actresses moaning on stage and

posted it on the Internet, which led to many attacks online, we didn't allow the audience to take photos and videos anymore.

Q: Did anything else frustrate you or obstacle the play from being staged?

B: 要说还有什么困难的话可能就是钱了。确实是没有钱，其他社团能拿到学校批的资金，但对我们来说很难，因为女权的话题终究比较敏感。

If there were any other difficulties it would be money. No money indeed. Other student societies could get funds granted by the school more easily, but it was difficult for us because the topic of feminism is ultimately more sensitive.

Q: In which aspect and why did you think it was sensitive?

B: 我们自己其实没有觉得这个话题有什么特别敏感的地方，当时其实对于传播性别方面的知识还是比较热血沸腾的，有一种使命感，同时自己很多的困惑也在这个过程中得到了解答，但是从老师的劝告和社会的反应中我们意识到原来很多话是不能说的，这个可能是我认为的敏感性吧。

We didn't feel that there was anything particularly sensitive about the topic ourselves; we were quite enthusiastic about spreading knowledge about gender. We had a sense of mission, and at the same time many of our own confusions were answered in the process, but from the advice of our teachers and the reaction of society we realised that there were a lot of things we couldn't say, and this is probably what I think is sensitive.

Q: The Chinese version of The Vagina Monologues made a lot of changes to the content comparing to the original version. How did you choose the topics of social concern included in the script?

B: 我们不管是在线上群聊还是线下的工作坊中，都会对近期的社会热点有一些讨论，这些也算是社团活动的一部分了。在排练中，我们就会把这些讨论的内容加入到演出里，让演出更加本土化和校园化。比如我们那一年讨论了"绿茶婊"、"黑木耳"、"剩女"这些对女性的污名化。在现有的男权社会话语体系下，"剩女"一词已经成为教育部 2007 年 8 月公布的汉语新词之一，但是这个词本身就是从男性视角出发对女性的凝视和定义。当女性达到了职业成就的诉求，但大众媒介却依然把婚恋当作评价女性的标准，又如何解放女性？剩女，是被谁剩下来？这个词太恶毒了。当时很多人对这个词的使用习以为常，但现在已经很少有人再用这个词了。我很高兴看到这样的转变。当然这一个话语歧视的消退并不是说平等已经实现了。

We discussed recent social issues in online group chats and workshops, which were part of Zhiheshe's regular activities. In rehearsals, we incorporated these discussions into the performance to make it more localised and campus-based. For example, that year we discussed the stigmatisation of women such as "lvcha biao (green tea bitch)", "hei muer (hei muer)" and "sheng nv (left over women)". Under the existing patriarchal social discourse, the term "sheng nv" had become one of the new Chinese words announced by the Ministry of Education in August 2007, when the term itself was male gaze and the definition of women from a male perspective. How could women be emancipated when they had achieved professional success, but the mass media still used marriage as a criterion for evaluating women? Sheng nv, by whom were they left? The term was so vicious. Many people took the term for granted at the time, but few people use it anymore now. I'm glad to see such a shift. Of course, this receding discourse of discrimination does not mean gender equality has been achieved.

Q: Did you make any adjustments to the play due to the censorship you came across? Why would this kind of adjustment solve the problem?

B: 像前面说的，老师的劝告啊，观众可能的反应啊这些，都是我们需要考虑的问题。我们其实从戏里删去了很多过于直白的表述，比如在呻吟的一幕里，之前用的剧本一直都是以达到搞笑的效果为主，有很多口语化的词汇，但为了避免引起太多争议，我们把很多涉及到女性生理的词都改成了比较科学的生理词汇。这样做的另一方面也是希望能够减少对我们的表演的污名化。也有同学和老师建议说让我们把标题里的阴道一词删掉，这样能够降低演出的敏感性，事实上有很多其他搬演 TVM 的剧组都这么做了，但我们很幸运地把它保留下来了。因为就像 Ensler 说的，把这个词说出来本身就是一种对男权社会的挑战。

As we said earlier, the teacher's advice, and the possible reactions of the audience, were mostly issues we needed to consider. We cut a lot of overly blunt expressions from the play. For example, in the moaning scene, the script used before had always been aimed at achieving a comical effect with many colloquial words, and to avoid causing too much controversy, we changed a lot of words to more scientific physiological terms. Another aspect of doing this was to hopefully reduce the stigmatisation of our performance. Some students and teachers also suggested that we remove the word vagina from the title so that the show would be less likely to be censored, and indeed many other productions performing TVM had done so, but we were lucky enough to keep it in. Because as Ensler says, saying the word out loud is in itself a challenge to a patriarchal society.

Q: What do you think of the ban on The Vagina Monologues in 2018?

我们这些社团的前成员们对这件事情也一直都有关注和讨论。有学校的学生潜伏进了知和社的微信群里，截图了关于 TVM 聊天记录，发给学校领导说”有重大舆情希望学校领导们关注”。我还看到网络上很多评论对此说，知和社是借身体器官搞性别对抗，不去控诉资本主义犯罪，却在中国这个”平等”的社会传播女性平权，试图将语境扩大化。看到这种论调，我觉得之所以禁演 TVM，恰恰是因为我们还需要 TVM。什么时候男性不再因为女权而感到受冒犯了，什么时候女性不再为自己的欲望感到羞耻了，才是这部戏退出舞台的时候。

We, the former members of the Zhiheshe, have been following and discussing this matter. Some students from the school lurked in the WeChat group and took screenshots of the TVM chat and sent them to the school leaders saying that “there is a major public opinion that we want the school leaders to be concerned about.” I also saw a lot of comments on the internet about this, saying that Zhiheshe was using the discussion of the body to engage in antagonism between genders and that instead of accusing capitalism of crimes, Zhiheshe was trying to expand the context by spreading the word about women’s rights in China’s “equal” society. This is exactly why we still need TVM on stage in China. When men stop feeling offended by feminism and when women stop feeling ashamed of their desires, that’s when the play should be retired.

Q: Why do you think it was banned after being staged successfully for 10 years?

B: 我觉得应该和 2018 年的中国 metoo 运动有关。之前知和社也不是没有面临过争议，但是 2018 年 metoo 运动期间有很多大学的教授被举报性侵，which 以前也肯定存在，但这次被闹大了，闹到了网络上，成了社会热点事件，其他大学也都开始害怕了。TVM 被禁一方面和中国日益紧张的政治语境有关，另一方面，metoo 运动提出了强奸并不仅仅是个人行为，当一个女生提出指控的时候，她的背后还站着成千上万的受害者，这是在中国颇为普遍的性别歧视行为，大学、媒体以及 NGO 中的男性相互之间以性剥削和性占有为战利品之荣耀，非典型已经变成了典型。它不仅仅是私人领域的男女问题，而是事关权力。当权力结构成为了被攻击的对象时，政府其实是害怕这股力量的，最好的例子就是 metoo 这个词条在网络上被禁，另一个例子是 2018 年 12 月中国的最高人民法院扛不住压力终于将性骚扰列入”民事案由”，使受害者更容易寻求司法救济。审查在压力下意识到应该更严格地审查女性，因为这股力量是有可能会团结起来动摇国家的父权结构，也即所谓的国家稳定性的。

I think it should be related to the Chinese #metoo movement of 2018. It’s not as if Zhiheshe hadn’t faced controversy before, but many university professors were reported for sexual assault during the 2018 #metoo

movement, which had also definitely existed before, but this time it was made a big deal and made it to the internet, becoming a hot social issue and other universities became scared. For me, the banning of TVM is partly related to the increasingly tense political context in China, but on the other hand, the #metoo movement brought up this discussion that raping is not simply a personal act. When a girl presses a charge, there are thousands of other victims standing behind her. It is an act of sexism that is quite widespread in China, where men in universities and NGOs take the glory of sexual exploitation of girls as trophies, and where the atypical has become typical. It is not just a question of men and women in the private sphere, it is about power. The best example of this is the banning of the word "metoo" on the internet, in both English and Chinese format. Another example is that in December 2018 China's Supreme People's Court could not resist the pressure to include sexual harassment as a "civil cause", making it easier for victims to seek judicial help. Under this kind of pressure, the censorship started to attack feminists because they realised that women were more than able to unite to shake the patriarchal structure of the state, also known as the stability of the state.

Q: 你怎么看待女权成为被打击的对象这件事情呢?

B: 女权成为被打击的对象也很正常，因为现阶段国家所推行的男女平等依然是所谓的男女各司其职，这种依然是结构性的压迫。我们现在很多的性别话题的讨论依然是建立在父权制度结构的基础上来进行的。社会主流话语如果不受到其他叙事的挑战，结构性的不平等就会一直存在；但如果社会模式能变得更多元、性别结构松动，社会也就不稳定了，因此女权主义势必是要被中国政府压制的。

It is easy to understand why feminists have been the target of attack. The equality between men and women promoted by the state at this stage is still the so-called gender division, which is still structural oppression. Much of our current discussion of gender topics is still based on the structure of the patriarchal system. Structural inequality will remain if other narratives do not challenge the dominant social discourse. Still, suppose social models can become more diverse and gender structures can be loosened up. In that case, society will be unstable and therefore feminism is bound to be suppressed by the Chinese government.

Interviewee C

Q: Can you please briefly introduce yourself to me?

C: I took part in the 2015 TVM performance at Fudan University, where I was an actress.

Q: How was the composition of the audience (gender, career, etc.) for The Vagina Monologues when you

were performing?

C: 我们那一年受邀成为了上海骄傲节参展作品的一部分，所以演出中除了学校的老师和学生以外，对性别议题和 LGBTQ 话题感兴趣的社会人士也很多。男女都有，比例我还真没注意，但我们收到了很多来自 LGBTQ 群体的好评。

We were invited to be part of an exhibited production at the Shanghai Pride Festival that year, so the performance was full of people interested in gender issues and LGBTQ topics, in addition to teachers and students from the university. There were both men and women, in proportions, I didn't really notice, but we received a lot of positive feedback from the LGBTQ community.

Q: Did you receive negative comments on your public platform? What did the comments say?

C: 负面的声音是一直存在的，知和社的前辈也一直这么跟我们说，不要因为害怕被骂而裹足不前，任何有争议的讨论都不可能是在鲜花和掌声中推进的。尤其是我们的宣传极大倚重诸如微信公众号和微博这些自媒体平台，不可能因为怕挨骂就不去发布信息。但发布信息的时候也得考虑很多，曝光程度不能太弱也不能太强，我们必须首先考虑的是这部戏能够生存下去，而不是影响力有多大。不光是线上媒体吧，我在学校的时候也有听朋友提起说一些不在我们社团的学生会对我们做的事情说三道四，说女权不应该存在等等。这种评论的存在其实很正常，但当它发展到 2018 年的程度，直接发展成举报而导致整个演出停演，这就是另一个级别的事情了。

Negative voices were always present, and we were told by senior members at Zhiheshe not to let fear of criticism stop us from moving forward, as no controversial discussion can move forward in the midst of flowers and applause. It was impossible not to publish information just because we were afraid of being criticised, especially as we relied heavily on self-media platforms such as WeChat and Weibo for our publicity. But there was a lot to consider when publishing information, not too little or too much exposure; we must first consider how to ensure the survival of this play instead of the influence of it. Also, it was not just the online press [where we were criticised]. when I was on campus I heard friends mention that some of the students from outside our society were saying things about what we were doing, that feminists shouldn't exist and so on. It's actually quite normal for this kind of commentary to exist, but when it goes to the extent that it went straight to a serious accusation in 2018 and led to the whole show being stopped, that's a whole other level of story.

Q: What do you think of the ban on The Vagina Monologues in 2018?

C: 我觉得这次禁演其实反映出了一个问题吧，就是举报文化又卷土重来了。2018 年 TVM 被禁演的时候，知和社的社交账号也全部被封了。解封之后，从 2019 年到现在，知和社的社交账号又陆续被举报封禁了很多次。前几年不是还发生了一件事情，震旦学院的一位老师在课堂上说南京大屠杀受难者人数不详，先存数据的使用不符合专业学术态度，呼吁学生要坚持学术严谨、反思战争原因，结果被学生举报解雇，还被录下来发到网上，老师被网暴得很惨。这些事情传达了一个很危险的信号，就是当局要加强文字狱，加强语言治罪，利用所谓的群众揭发，造成更广泛的恐惧效应。在处理这些事情的时候，执行人甚至可能都没有去彻查这件事情是否属实、严重程度如何，而全部一棒子打死。这是一件很可怕的事情，不仅仅是对于女权。这种举报本身就有点以恶制恶的意思，把人置于恐惧之下进行制约。一个文明健康的文化和制度是预防恶产生的文化和制度，而不是在制造和放纵恶后再对恶加以惩罚和打击的文化和制度。

I think this ban reflected a resurgence in the culture of whistleblowing, and when TVM was banned in 2018, all of Zhiheshe's social accounts were also blocked. After the ban was lifted, from 2019 to the present, these social accounts have been reported and banned many more times. I remember it also happened a few years ago when a teacher at Aurora College said in class that the number of victims of the Nanjing Massacre was unknown, that the use of pre-existing data was not in line with the professional academic requirement, and that students should adhere to academic rigour and reflect on the causes of the war, which resulted in being reported by the students and she was dismissed. It was also recorded and posted online, and the teacher was subjected to much internet violence. These things conveyed a dangerous signal that the authorities wanted to intensify the verbal censure and use the so-called mass revelations to create a wider fear effect. In dealing with these matters, the enforcers sometimes might not even thoroughly investigate whether the matter is true and how serious it is. This is just terrible, and not just for feminists. This kind of reporting in itself is a bit of a case of fighting evil with evil, putting people under fear for restraint. A civilised culture and social system prevents evil from arising, not one that creates and indulges evil and then punishes and combats it.

Q: The Chinese version of The Vagina Monologues made a lot of changes to the content comparing to the original version. How did you choose the topics of social concern included in the script?

C: 其实现在回想起来，我们当时为了避免给社团和学校惹麻烦，对剧本修改的倾向一直是从个人生活的角度谈论公共问题。比如在第一幕里，我们删掉了不同角色唱着"男尊女卑"的场面，因为这里涉及到了对传统文化的攻击；在性骚扰一幕，以前我们演出的版本里面都有一个受害者列举出生活中可能的性侵者："堂兄，导师，我不愿想起的那个男人，那个朋友，那个美术老师，能够轻松伤害我们

的人都在我们的身边”。在讨论中我们意识到这一段也可能会被人拿来攻击，说我们攻击整个父权社会、整个男性群体、制造性别对立，因此这一段也被删掉了。甚至连父权这个词，以及一切和权力相关的词，都被从整个剧本里拿掉了。2015 年还有一件很重要的事情就是开放了二胎政策，当时针对这个二胎政策我们也写了新的一幕加进去，但是台词里说的是养不起小孩，而不是抨击整个政策本身。
In retrospect, our tendency to revise the play to avoid getting Zhiheshe and the school into trouble was to talk about public issues from our personal lives. In the first act, for example, we removed the scene where the different characters sing about “men are superior to women” because it involved an attack on traditional culture; in the sexual harassment scene, the previous versions of our show had a victim who listed possible sexual predators in her life, “cousin, mentor, that man I don’t want to think about, that ‘friend,’ the art teacher, people who can hurt us so easily are all around.” During the discussion, we realised that this paragraph could also be seen as an attack on the whole patriarchal society as inciting gender antagonism, so this paragraph was also removed. Another important thing that happened in 2015 was the opening up of the two-child policy, and we wrote a new scene about it, but the lines were about families not being able to afford another child, rather than attacking the policy itself.

Q: I heard the teacher had suggested the word “vagina” be removed from the title, have you considered this?
C: 我们也收到了相同的建议，但是我们也坚持没有删。如果不敢把阴道这个词说出来，那这部戏也就没意思了。不过我们也算是比较幸运的，因为其他很多剧团都被要求改了戏的标题。像海狸社把名字改成了《阴 dao 多云》，”道”还不能写成汉字必须写成拼音，北大剧团改成了《她独白》，连阴道这个词都不被允许说出来，还有北外，这个你应该也知道，把标题改成了《V 独白》。这样还有什么意思呀，戏的初衷都丧失了。
We received the same advice, but we insisted on not cutting it either. The play wouldn’t mean anything if we were afraid to say the word “vagina” out loud. However, we can consider ourselves relatively fortunate because many other theater groups were required to change the titles of their plays. For instance, the Beaver Club changed its name to “Overcast to Cloudy,” and ‘dao’ could not be written in Chinese characters, but must be written in pinyin; the Peking University theatre club changed it to “Her Monologues.” The word “vagina” was not allowed to be uttered. Ther’s also Beijing Foreign Studies University theatre club, which you should have heard about, changed the title to “V Monologues.” The original intention of the play was completely lost.

Q: I also heard that in later years of staging the play, Zhiheshe was trying to weaken the western background

of the play, is that true in your case?

C: 是这样的，一方面为了让这部戏更本地化，更能引起共鸣，我们一直都在做去西方化的努力；另一方面，由于”西方”这个词在中国现在越来越敏感了，提这个词确实对演出的顺利进行没有什么帮助，所以我们也尽量不提。

On the one hand, we were making efforts to de-Westernise the play in order to make it more local and resonant; on the other hand, as the word “Western” was becoming more and more sensitive in China, mentioning it was not really helpful to the successful running of the show, so yes, we tried not to mention it.

Q: What made you consider so much about censorship during the creative process?

C: 2015 年另一件很大的事情是女权五姐妹被捕，你肯定有听说过。这件事情现在看起来简直就是一场政治迫害。反对在公共交通工具上的性骚扰，提高大众社会性别觉悟法律意识，这原本是很好的倡导活动，谁知道就这样被抓了。而且警察自己找不到能定罪的证据和罪名，就把”聚众滋事”的罪名扣在她们头上。还有很多人在听说这件事情以后疯传她们是被境外势力操控的。在这种网络与线下的各种媒体都越来越严苛的审查环境中，理性讨论的声音渐渐被限制、被消声，多元的声音被打压，我们也只能对创作的内容更加谨慎一些。说话变得艰难，也总不可能一句话都不说，只能对说出的话更小心一点。可能这也算是一种恐惧效应吧。

Another big event in 2015 was the arrest of the Feminist Five, which you have no doubt heard about. This incident now seems like political persecution. What they were doing was simply a campaign against sexual harassment on public transport and to raise awareness of gender-conscious laws in society, but who knew that they would be arrested for this? The police couldn’t find evidence to convict them, so they accused them of “picking quarrels and provoking troubles”. After hearing about the incident, many people spread the rumour that foreign forces were manipulating them. In this environment of increasingly stringent censorship in both online and offline media, the voices of rational discussion were gradually restricted and silenced, and the pluralistic voices were suppressed, so we could only be more cautious about what we create. It had already become difficult to speak, but it was impossible not to say anything at all, so we had to be more careful about what we said. Perhaps this is also a kind of fear effect.