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Chapter 35

In the name of stability

Literary censorship and self-censorship in contemporary China

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35

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Literary censorship and self-censorship in contemporary China[1]

Kamila Hladíková

Introduction

Postmodern approaches to censorship – the so-called 'new censorship' referred to for example by Burt (1994), Holquist (1994), or Post (1998) – consider censorship a natural part of every speech or discourse. They strive to overcome the traditionally perceived antagonism between writer and censor, 'light' and 'darkness', 'truth' and 'lie'. Already thinkers like Lacan or Foucault started to examine, what is and is not possible to say under certain psychological or historical conditions. According to Bourdieu (1992: 175) all discourses are characterized by a certain tension between expression and censorship. In other words, the attention shifts from the institutionalized censorship leaving blank spaces on pages of printed texts, burning books and punishing writers and/or publishers, toward discursive formations and self-censorship, intentional or unintentional, conscious or subconscious.

For Foucault, power is always productive, constructing knowledge and social practice. Analogically, the 'new censorship' is also described as productive and is characterized as a form of production of speech and meaning always preceding every text (Post 1998: 2). As Butler writes, 'if power is, however, also productive, then it contributes to making the object that it also constrains. […] the subject who is censored as well as the subject who censors are constituted in part by a restrictive and productive power' (1998: 247). For Butler, censorship aims to regulate the whole domain of socially acceptable and imaginable speeches, i.e., to regulate the discourse. For example, censorship may be used to codify certain version of historic collective memory, as the form of state control over preserving national legacy or as insisting that certain historical events can be narratively represented in a single and unquestionable way (252).

The very nature of censorship is always monologic. As Müller (2004: 13) argued:

> The legitimizing discourses brought forward in defense of censorship depict censorship as a means of protecting the public from allegedly harmful influences, which means that a monolithic subject and common interests are constructed, thus denying legitimacy to diverging interests of particular audiences.

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A 'canon', which is (re)constructed by censorship then serves as a tool 'to measure cultural products' (ibid.). This is mentioned also by Fik: 'As censor determines the hierarchy in arts, he [the censor] finally overcomes the role of 'co-author' of a particular work […] and participates in formation of cultural reality […] serving as patron of some authors while oppressing others' (2012: 413).

Despite growing pressure on censorship in contemporary PRC, which is, however, focusing mainly on media, social media, and internet, where it permeates into all possible spheres of public or even private life, literary censorship seems to be less actual. There is a general presupposition that after the end of the Cultural Revolution and the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, literary production in the PRC has abandoned strict and binding rules of Maoist discourse and Chinese socialist realism and has gained a certain degree of freedom of expression. Nevertheless, censorship has not disappeared from Chinese literature. It has only become more subtle and sophisticated, or, in words of one of the most renowned contemporary Chinese writers Yan Lianke, has shifted from 'hard censorship' to a 'soft' one (2016: 263), relying mainly on self-censorship. Such a system motivates writers to actively comply with the Party's long-term ideological objectives while at the same time enabling them to insert certain acceptably critical points or even covered hints with subversive potential.

Starting with Mao's 'Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Arts' delivered in May 1942, for the Communist leadership, literature was considered one of the main tools of propaganda and its aim was officially limited to disseminating key ideological concepts among the broad masses of people. Censorship and (often violently forced) self-censorship have both been natural parts of Chinese literary system established after the founding of the PRC in 1949. The centralized, state-controlled literary establishment was gradually abolished during the post-Mao era, but basic principles in the official Party discourse remain and literature should still to some extent serve to extraliterary objectives. Contemporary literary system retained some of the traits described by Link (2000), and Chinese writers have still not been able to leave the 'velvet prison' of 'resigned agreement' mentioned by Hungarian dissident writer Haraszti (1987), however, many of them learned to enjoy the comfort this 'prison' offers.

Building on Hockx's (1999) adaptation of Bordieu's (1993) concept of the literary field for modern Chinese literature, which is characterized by the addition of 'political capital' to Bordieu's original two-dimensional figure, the present study highlights continuity in the official standpoints and requirements concerning the basic function of literature and arts despite turbulent changes in both politics and society in the PRC during the last 70 years. Hockx linked the 'political capital' to '[writers'] ability to deal with the concept of people', which is still plausible, not only on the official level – as the slogan of 'serving the people' was repeatedly stressed by chairman Xi Jinping on 'Work Forum on Literature and Arts' held in Beijing in 2014 – but also in the everyday reality of each part of the literary field, from writers through editors to publishers and sellers.

The literary field in the PRC is still characterized by the tension between writers' (critical) commitment to 'reality' and the officially formulated (idealistic) aims of literary creation that surfaced back in 1942 in Yan'an as it was described by Goldman (1971). This tension has arisen from the collision between the symbolic and the political capitals, which both need to deal with the growing potential of the economic capital and massive influence of pop culture since the 1990s. Based on case analyses of selected literary works bringing up 'sensitive' topics, some of which have been banned or were subject to official criticism during the last few decades, this study aims to describe the mechanisms and provide a deeper

insight into the ideological objectives of contemporary Chinese censorship, which can be summed up by notions of 'maintaining stability' and 'social harmony'.

Censorship in the PRC from history to present

Starting from the 1930s, relations between the CCP leadership and Chinese intelligentsia, nurtured by the liberal spirit of the May Fourth Movement influenced by Western philosophy and values, were tense. The CCP strived to incorporate members of educated elites – in that time mostly recruited from gentry or bourgeoisie – with the left-wing inclinations into the process of formation and dissemination of its ideology, but it lacked the mechanisms how to effectively limit the leftist intellectual and literary discourse to the actual interpretation of Party ideology. Only during the 1940s did the ideology apparatus come up with mechanisms that were for the first time used during the 'rectification movement' in Yan'an. The first 'literary dissent', described in detail by Goldman, foreshadowed the relationship between writers and the CCP elites after 1949. The movement culminated with 'Forum on Literature and Arts', which determined the future position of writers in Chinese socialist literary system and defined the primary function of literature as a tool of propaganda. Literature and art as formulated in Mao Zedong's thought were supposed to serve the people and it was expected from 'revolutionary writers' that they 'collect the raw material based on the life of people and transform it into the ideological form of literature and art serving to the masses' (Mao 1996: 472). In his concluding talk, Mao strongly opposed the standpoint of some writers that literature and arts should remain separated from politics and that it is the writers' obligation to 'equally stress the bright and the dark [sides of reality]' and to 'expose [evil or short-comings]' (479) in the way the founder of modern Chinese literature Lu Xun did in his satirical essays that targeted the Kuomintang government.

The Yan'an campaign became the main model for political movements of the 1950s and 1960s whose aim was usually not simply to eliminate dissenting voices, but rather to 'rectify' them through ideological training and reeducation through labor. The Maoist era ended and in 1978 Deng Xiaoping announced a new policy of 'reforms and opening up', which brought an influx of Western ideas and influences again, after almost 40 years. Emerging literary trends and currents included metafiction, postmodernism or feminist literature, and the Chinese version of socialist realism, a combination of revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism introduced by Zhou Enlai and Guo Moruo in the late 1950s' virtually disappeared from the literary discourse. However, Mao's key notions on literature have never been fully revised and the premises of serving the people, being rooted in the real life of the masses, or emphasizing the positive side, are on the official level still plausible as the untouchable guidelines for literary and artistic creation, as it is evident from official materials.

Censorship in the Chinese socialist literary system after the Cultural Revolution

The Chinese socialist literary system of the 1980s was described in Link (2000), where he paid much attention to censorship and self-censorship. Link pointed out that – unlike literary systems in the former eastern bloc in Europe, as analyzed for example by Darnton (1995) or Urbański (2012) – the Chinese system was less institutionalized and was largely based on psychological pressure, stressing the need of ideological education and conscious

self-censorship. Link has described it as 'more subtle' and at the same time 'more totalistic' than other systems (2000: 56). He writes:

> Socialist China did not have the kind of formal censorial organs that other autocratic regimes have maintained. Literary control was less mechanical and more psychological than it has been elsewhere. It depended primarily on the private calculation of risks and balances in the minds of writers, editors, and those who supported them.
> *(Link 2000: 81)*

In this system, every individual had to negotiate his/her own position before taking any kind of action, regarding the political 'weather', but also his/her personal connections. For Link 'the political-literary weather in socialist China' was highly unpredictable exactly because of 'the primacy of human beings over written documents' (77). Such atmosphere and the enormous pressure of personal responsibility in all spheres of the literary field led naturally to the strengthening of self-censorship. As Barmé (1999) wrote, borrowing Haraszti's metaphor of 'velvet prison': '[…] coercive style of indoctrination was changed into self-imposed acquiescence […]' (3). Any kind of criticism always had to be indirect and covered, something that seemed quite natural to writers rooted in the two-thousand-years-long tradition of literature and censorship in China. Specific literary means had been developed by generations of traditional Chinese literati – allegories, analogies, fables, metaphors, and so forth, not dissimilar to the modern form of so-called Aesopean language used in the Soviet literature as described by Loseff (1984).

Following the implementation of basic principles of the market economy after 1992, the subsequent commercialization of all kinds of production loosened up the heavily controlled literary system and writers were no longer existentially fully dependent on their 'work unit'. They could earn high provisions from the sales of their books and could even leave the official institutions and 'dive into the sea' of the free market. Nevertheless, even under such conditions, censorship and self-censorship have still been fully employed.

After 'opening up' the Chinese regime faced new challenges and it became more difficult to exercise direct and strict control. Large-scale political campaigns of the 1950s and 1960s, intruding into the lives of virtually all people, were in the 1980s substituted by smaller-scale critical campaigns with more specific targets, but much vaguer in character. Their aim was, on the one hand, to disseminate the actual ideological directives and on the other hand to show selected negative examples of themes and thoughts to be avoided in public discourse. The period of the 1980s saw two major centrally organized campaigns, both of them targeting what was labeled as 'liberalism', a term describing attitudes and behavior generally ascribed to the 'bourgeois capitalist' influences 'from the West'.

The target of the 1980s' campaigns gradually shifted from 'modernism' and 'humanism' to literature (and film) that by their uncritical approach seemed to promote even vaguer categories, like 'selfishness and irresponsibility', and were considered 'decadent'. Already in 1980 the general secretary Hu Yaobang, who was later in 1987 himself criticized for spreading 'bourgeois liberalist' ideas, organized a conference on drama, where he talked about negative 'social effects' of controversial art and called for bigger 'social responsibility' on the side of authors (Barmé 1999: 11). Later he warned against the 'candy artillery shells' sent from the West in the form of 'women, fancy commodities, and lust for money'. On the ideological level, these 'arrows' were represented by notions of 'literary modernism', 'humanism', and 'alienation' (异化) [from the original ideals of Communism] (Link 2000: 63).

One of the key arguments against 'modernism' and in general the new literary techniques inspired by Western modernism and avant-garde literature was 'unintelligibility' and 'obscured' meaning, which were – alongside the 'negative social effects' – seen as the most undesirable features of literary works targeted in critical campaigns. In other words, from the authorities' point of view, literature should not corrupt readers with descriptions of decadent and irresponsible lifestyle, but rather focus on promoting socialist values. To do it properly, literature must be able to convey the meaning in the form, style and language that is understandable to broad masses. Such a requirement clearly resonates with Mao's initial ideas about literature and art pronounced in Yan'an.

As indicated, Chinese literary censorship has been characterized by persistent psychological pressure, self-censorship, risk-balancing, and powerful connections. This kind of system typically targets works only after their publication, which happens in the case that one or more parts of the subtle and highly subjective control mechanism fail. During the 1980s, specific literary and film works were singled out for criticism in official media to illustrate negative examples. These campaigns were mostly limited to a small number of works or authors, writers were rarely imprisoned and use of physical violence typical for the time of the Cultural Revolution was not applied any more. Under market economy conditions, any 'scandal' could, on the one hand, draw the curiosity of readers and bring fame to the author, but, on the other hand, would often lead to loss of state employment, social position or Party membership for everyone involved (often editors, as the author might have been more independent). Some writers even successfully monetized their 'controversial books' in case they complied with the system in past and agreed to do so in future. This kind of social and economic pressure has gradually changed the system from 'hard' to 'soft' censorship and the relation between writers and the state has finally, through decades of ideological education and reeducation, come to the point when writers and editors, incorporated into the system and motivated by the lure of the market, actively participate.

With the loosening of the centralized state literary system and under influence of market economy forces and internet, censorship lost its ultimate power, but was never abandoned completely. The key principles and mechanisms from Yan'an have still been – more covertly – at stake. This fact was confirmed after Xi Jinping came to power in 2012. On October 15, 2014, he gave a talk at the 'Forum on Literature and Art in Beijing', which was immediately compared to Mao's talk from 1942. In his opening talk titled 'Literature and Art cannot Lose the Course in the Waves of Market Economy',[2] Xi stressed the importance of creating such works that 'will not cast any shadows of doubts about our great nation and our great era' (Xi 2014). Targeting primarily commercialized, consumerist, 'fast food' production, he, on the one hand, repeated the idea, originally used by Mao in 1956 and again brought up by Jiang Zemin in 2002, of 'letting a hundred flowers bloom and a hundred schools of thought contend' in a call for a variety of forms and themes, but on the other hand he emphasized that 'the socialist art is primarily the art of the people'. As such, it should 'reflect the voice of the people and persist in serving the people and socialism'. Contemporary literature and art should, similarly to the revolutionary romanticism of the 1950s and 1960s 'combine the spirit of realism with romantic idealism […] use light to fight the darkness, use beauty to fight ugliness, and show the people glory and hope, tell them that the dream is reachable'. Xi even mentioned the metaphor of the writer as 'engineer of human soul' originally used in 1934 by the father of the Soviet socialist realism of Stalin's era Zhdanov. Finally, he condemned such works that 'ridicule the sublime, skew the classics, turn the history upside down, are not able to differentiate between truth and lie, good and evil, beautiful and ugly, and focus only on the dark sides of the society'. Some works, although not mentioned

specifically, were likened to MDMA, others were called 'cultural waste' and even the – at times much-discussed – slogan of 'art for art' did not escape the leader's criticism (Xi 2015).

Although since the 1990s the Chinese literary market is not as strictly regulated as before, even compared to the 1980s, specific strategies need to be applied by writers, editors and publishers in order to survive and succeed. As the 'soft censorship is deliberately flexible and vague' (Yan 2016: 265), self-censorship has been applied more carefully than ever and 'the entire industry has been transformed into one in which everyone is watching everyone else' (267). As Yan pointed out, rather than cutting out problematic parts of texts, more attention has now been paid to 'intent and sentiment' of works. It means that even 'problematic' topics (such as the Cultural Revolution or corruption) are acceptable when handled in a proper way. In general, such works are appreciated that represent the so-called 'major melody' (主旋律), i.e., follow the official master narrative and deal even with negative aspects through the lens of 'positivity' (265). The works, which comply with these requirements are, in accordance with Fik's words quoted above, gaining publicity and awarded important prizes, while those that do not are subject to marginalization and slowly forgotten, rather than banned – a step drawing too much attention in the globalized world connected through internet and social media.

Dealing with 'sensitive topics': Three case studies

There are two main categories of works subjected to a ban after their publication in the PRC during the last 30 years: works labeled as 'pornographic'[3] and those condemned for political reasons. This study has focused on 'political mistakes' (政治错误) rather than on the content labeled as 'pornographic', even though it mostly does have political implications, too. It is a generally known fact that notable political taboos arose around certain historical events (for example the Great Leap Forward or the June Fourth Clampdown in 1989). However, there are much less obvious 'political mistakes' based on perspectives and standpoints that are different from the official master narrative, which are considered more serious than for example setting the plot in a problematic historical period. Yan has complained about how the official literary scene tends to use 'concealment and deception to encourage amnesia and the creation of false memories' (2016: 268).

Contemporary censorship tends to pay special attention to several 'sensitive topics', among which perhaps the most notorious one is the representation of some of China's 55 ethnic minorities, namely Tibetans or more recently Uighurs. Literary works are expected to emphasize the positive representation of their life in 'new China' after 1949. Official propaganda tends to stress their 'backwardness' in the old 'feudal slavery system' in sharp contrast to the progress and flourishment brought to them by the Chinese (i.e., Han) 'civilizing mission'.[4] In general, writers should stay within the frame of stereotypes created by the official propaganda and spread by state authorities. Besides the contrast between 'backward' old societies and progress and wealth brought by the socialist modernity, it allows a positive reflection of certain exotic aspects of native cultures (such as Tibetan 'mysteriousness') and harmonious cohabitation with the Han majority.

A well-known early example of a writer targeted during the campaign against bourgeois liberalization in 1987 was Ma Jian (马建) who was criticized for his negative representation of Tibetan culture. It provided him with a reason to leave the country via Hong Kong and finally to stay in exile after the Tiananmen clampdown in 1989. Ma, who even in exile is known for his brutal naturalistic depictions of all the kinds of cruelty that one human being can cause to another, found inspiration for his stories during an adventurous trip to Tibet in

the mid-1980s. Later he published a series of five short stories called *Stick out your Tongue or Everything is just a Void* (亮出你的舌苔或空空荡荡). It appeared in the prestigious official literary journal *People's Literature* (人民文学) with approval of the editor-in-chief, senior writer Liu Xinwu (刘心武), who lost his position after Ma Jian's escape.

The main critical argument against Ma's work was that it depicted Tibetan characters too negatively and not as based on reality. Such representation was said to 'vilify Tibetan culture'. The short stories were subsequently criticized as an example of several aspects of the 'bourgeois liberalism' imported from the West, including open descriptions of sex, violence and death, which proved their 'decadence' and 'negative social effect'. This kind of 'decadence' was at the same time closely related to the author's lifestyle: Ma Jian was not employed in an official *danwei*, lived in a free community of artists in the suburbs of Beijing and – running away from police harassment – spent several months traveling around China and Tibet, as he himself described this period in his nonfiction piece *Red Dust* (红尘, 2001). In his Tibetan series, this lifestyle was reflected in the author-narrator who recorded what he observed, experienced and heard during his travels.

The stories were inspired by the author's personal experiences and perceptions, mixed with oral legends and notorious orientalist stereotypes characterizing Tibet as a 'magical' or 'mysterious' exotic place. Furthermore, the author applied some of the broadly accepted Chinese stereotypes and fantasies about Tibetans and other ethnic minorities, turning around 'savage mind'-like concepts of cultural inferiority, for example, believe in 'feudal superstitions' or – as compared to the strict Confucian morality of the Han – more liberal attitudes to sexual relations and sex (extramarital sex, promiscuity, polygamy, polyandry).[5] While this kind of representation of Tibet and Tibetans would be possible as a criticism of the feudal past, as a depiction of the present state it was ideologically not acceptable.

Shortly after the publication, the forefront *Journal for Literature and Arts* (文艺报) published an official reaction of the Tibetan branch of Writers' Association (Zhongguo zuojia xiehui Xizang fenhui 1987). It opens with a statement that the work 'naturally incited a strong resentment and extreme indignation of the masses of Tibetan people and other brotherly nationalities, as well as of literary circles in general' (2). The author(s) emphasized the need to 'stick to the 'four basic principles'[6] and fight against the 'bourgeois liberalism'' (ibid.) and argued that literature should 'stress support and help of the CCP in the economic development in Tibet' and 'support and protect the equality of all nationalities, their unity, mutual love and help provided by the new socialist relations' (ibid.). The short stories are considered mere reflections of 'the author's fantasies and his impure soul'.

The critique, on the one hand, strives to affirm that Tibet has its own history and rich culture (and thus is not 'uncivilized' or 'barbaric' as Ma has described), but, on the other hand, it strongly emphasized the CCP's key role in 'overthrowing the feudal serf system' after the so-called 'peaceful liberation' and in implementation of what the propaganda calls 'democratic reforms'. Important arguments point out that the author 'fails to describe the real life of Tibetan people', departs from 'his own subjective imaginations and is driven by his own lust and greed for money' (ibid.). Such negative representation allegedly creates a mistaken image of 'hardworking, unpretentious, wise and brave Tibetan people' who 'are depicted as heartless, dull, cruel and immoral, which deeply hurts their feelings and should be considered as severe offense against the ethnic and religious policy of the Party' (3).

Finally, the closing part of the critical text calls to responsibility the editors of *People's Literature*, the original publisher of the work. The author(s) ponder over the critical state of literary and art circles, where the ideas of 'bourgeois liberalism' had already rooted so

deeply, and they call for more attention to be paid to the editorial and publishing processes, which should give more space to works that reflect the correct socialist values. In case of ethnic minorities, literature and art are expected to stress the key principle of 'unity' (团结) of all PRC's nationalities and general social and economic progress, which all the 'brother-nationalities' have reached thanks to the CCP. In the longtime perspective, Tibet is one of the most vulnerable territories of the PRC and the government has exerted huge effort and spent endless resources since the 1950s to keep the region stable. With the leaders' emphasis on 'maintaining stability' and 'social harmony', it is not surprising that Tibet has become one of the most sensitive topics in Chinese literature and film, as proved by another well-known censorship incident some 16 years later.

In 2003 a young female poet of mixed Sino-Tibetan origin Tsering Woeser (Weise 唯色, b. 1966) published a nonfiction book called *Notes on Tibet* (西藏笔记). It was a collection of highly subjective essays written as the author's confession about her relationship to Tibet and its cultural and religious tradition. The character of essays ranges from travelogues (or rather informed traveler's observations) through records of history, both written and oral, mythology and legends, to personal ponderings reflecting the author's own search for roots and her intimate meditations inspired by Tibetan Buddhism. Some of the essays were openly polemical and many included references to foreign sources, literary and academic. The work represented Tibet from a perspective that was considerably different from the official Party narrative. Tibetan history in Woeser's essays was not the history of the 'feudal theocracy', 'peaceful liberation', and 'democratic reforms', but a history constructed as based on Buddhist legends, a spiritual history violently disrupted by the incursion of Marxist and Maoist ideology and dialectic materialism. The author was probably aware of the subversive and potentially controversial character of the text and applied certain extent of self-censorship as it is evident from her later uncensored texts published in Taiwan. Already the Taiwanese reedition of *Notes on Tibet* from 2006, published under a new title, *A Poem Called Tibet* (名为西藏的诗; Weise, 2006), included passages that could have never been published in the PRC, namely the parts about the tabooed Cultural Revolution in Tibet and about the two Tibetan religious leaders living in exile, the 14th Dalai Lama and the 17th Karmapa.

In fact, even the original Huacheng edition had many potentially subversive passages that in the end led to the ban of the book in mainland China. For example, in the chapter called 在轮回中永怀挚爱 (Eternal Love in Samsara; Weise 2003: 204) there is a long quote from the 14th Dalai Lama's autobiography *Freedom in Exile* and from the book *Tibet: Its History, Religion, and People* written by the Dalai Lama's elder brother Thubten Jigme Norbu known as Taktser Rinpoche, books that were published in Lhasa in the 1980s as 'internal' material intended for critical evaluation. Woeser used elliptic hints revealing the pressure of self-censorship. For example, the third part of the Chinese edition called 西藏感受 (Tibetan Impressions), includes the author's ponderings about her own troubled identity and about life in contemporary Tibet, suggesting several polemic points, which, however, could not be discussed openly. The last essay, 西藏随想 (A Few Thoughts about Tibet; Weise 2003: 214) only outlines several sensitive or tabooed topics in a lyrically stylized form without getting to the point – a kind of 'Aesopean language' communicable only to the knowing implied readers. Finally, the epilogue raises a question about 'representation of Tibet' in reference to E. Said's book *Orientalism*, which opens with a well-known quote by Marx ('They cannot represent themselves; they have to be represented') as a clear indication of the de-facto colonial relation between China and Tibet.

In an independent documentary *The Dossier* (Zhu 2014) Woeser said she did not expect any problems after the book had already been out, even mentioning how she gave copies as

presents to her Party official colleagues. However, exactly her colleagues and superiors from the Cultural Federation (文联) stood up against the book and criticized its 'roundly mistaken political standpoints and opinions', 'bordering with political misdemeanor' (Cchering 2015: 8). The official statement released by the Tibet Writers' Association criticized the 'narrow-minded nationalism' present in the book, drawing it close to 'splittist tendencies' of the 'Dalai Lama clique'. The author was further blamed from 'drowning in nostalgic talks about the old Tibet', 'not sticking to correct political principles' and 'lacking social responsibility' (ibid.) As a result, Woeser lost her job in the official institution along with her income and all social securities and had to leave Lhasa. Her case proves that the official Party rhetoric and vigilance are still not so far from Yan'an. On the contrary, during the last few years, we have been witnessing a new wave of 'cold wind' after the new Party leadership came to power in 2012.

A more recent fiction book by Ning Ken (宁肯) called *Heaven – Tibet* (天·藏) illustrates well the sophistication that an author needs to apply to have a book about Tibet published in China in the 2010s. In a review published on the official website of Chinese Writers' Association, Wang Desong compared the novel to a labyrinth, borrowing the words of senior Tibetan writer and the Tibet Writers' Association chairman Tashi Dawa (扎西达娃), who called the work 'philosophical labyrinth novel'. Tashi Dawa is quoted to have praised the novel as 'a work about Tibet, which transcends Tibet, the first novel after Ma Yuan's (马原) 1980s stories, which *represents* and *discovers* Tibet from a purely literary point of view' (Wang 2010, emphasis added). It may sound strange because the main characters are a Han Chinese intellectual, a French Buddhist monk, and a young woman of mixed Sino-Tibetan origin who grew up in Beijing and studied in Paris. The novel does not say literally anything about the 'real life of Tibetan people', not to say anything about recent Tibetan history. But from a certain point of view Tashi Dawa, one of those Wenlian officials who criticized Woeser in 2003, was right. The novel gives as many hints as is possible and acceptable in present Chinese literary system, building a 'labyrinth' of suppressed, forbidden collective memory.

The main character, Han Chinese intellectual Wang Mojie decided to move to Tibet on purpose, in Wang Desong's words, after he 'experienced the loss of direction common among intellectuals at the end of the 1980s'. Indeed, they are clues hinting that Wang Mojie came to Tibet after what he had personally witnessed on the Tiananmen Square in June 1989, as it is symbolically expressed through his masochist deviation due to which he finds sexual pleasure in being beaten and humiliated by women in police uniforms. Not much is said about what happened in Tibet since the 1950s, but there are indirect references to the Cultural Revolution, for example when an old nun from a nunnery destroyed in 1968 told Weige (the Sino-Tibetan female character) searching for her grandmother: 'We worked together … we cleaned the streets … I wanted to give it [a letter] to her, but I had already lost it. Everything was lost' (Ning 2010: 190). Or at one point the narrator characterized Tibet as 'shadows of faded glory – seemingly, the tradition goes on, but in fact, it is nothing more than an illusion. But even an illusion can become a kind of existence, creating an illusory history' (Ning 2010: 256). Just as the whole story of the novel is an illusion. It celebrates Tibetan Buddhist tradition that was in reality drastically disrupted, and one of the main focuses of the novel, the dialogue between a French Buddhist monk, Mathieu Ricard, personal interpreter of the 14th Dalai Lama, and his father, the French philosopher Jean-Françoise Ravel, in reality could never take place in Drepung monastery in Lhasa. It happened in Kathmandu.

Ning Ken's novel is an example of a new level of sophistication of self-censorship in China. The work fully complies with the official narrative of unproblematic, yet orientalistically mysterious Tibet,[7] leaving numerous blank spaces in its history and the collective memory of Tibetan people, who are not even present, not to say represented, in the novel. But at the same

time, the 'mix of realism with modernist and postmodernist narrative techniques' (Wang 2010) allows the implication of meanings that cannot be expressed openly. Only a handful of intellectuals would understand these meanings, such as references to the Cultural Revolution, destruction of monasteries and religious traditions or the so-called Tiananmen 'June 4 Incident', while the general public in China as well as in the West (as proved by the reception of the novel in its Czech translation) can enjoy the Shangrila-like fantasies about Tibetan Buddhist wisdom leading a dialogue with Western philosophy amid the beautiful scenery of the Himalayas.

Conclusion: Literature in service of social stability

As shown by the analysis, censorship and self-censorship are still an integral part of the present Chinese literary system, only the methods shifted from direct force and violence to softer psychological as well as economic pressures. Yan (2016) mentioned a system of 'self-monitoring' based on 'the seduction of power, fame and influence rather than being a product of fear and desperation' (2016: 270). Under such conditions, all parts of the literary field are actively participating in creating a – from the CCP's point of view – harmless meta-discourse of 'social harmony' and 'stability'. Although the concrete ideological objectives, mechanisms and tools, have notably changed over the last three decades, the key premises of literature 'serving the people', now clearly a substitute for the State and the Party, remained. Literature and art still should be, in the words of the Communist leaders, based in the real life of masses and should convey a clear meaning, emphasizing socialist values. Positive depictions of reality are preferred over social criticism and writers should avoid 'decadent' content with 'negative social effect'. Nevertheless, a certain degree of experimentation may be welcome, as it diverts attention from politically sensitive topics.

Building an image of 'harmonious society', literature should contribute to 'maintaining stability' and promote the 'unity of motherland' and all her nationalities. Any deviation from the official narrative, which provides its own ideologically determined complex interpretation of history and culture, is seen as a transgression that cannot be tolerated. Direct censorship may be applied in the case that a published work has instigated discussions in public space, media, or on the internet.[8] The aim of such censorship is to showcase a negative example, which helps to fix the frames of discourse. However, this is the most extreme tool for dealing with works including severe moral or political 'mistakes'. More often, some works simply tend to be made less visible compared to officially promoted literature that gets preferential publicity and makes it to prize lists.

An alternative way of publishing in Taiwan or Hong Kong has become a regular option for mainland authors, possibly opening them the door to Western markets, where 'censored' books are especially welcome and appreciated. Writers thus have a choice of targeted market for their books and apply self-censorship accordingly. In the time of the internet, social media, and digital authoritarianism, literature is no longer the main tool for disseminating Party ideology and literary censorship has different functions and objectives: to avoid social turmoil and 'maintain stability' by setting the positive frame of 'core socialist values' (社会主义核心价值观). The eight decades of political education of Chinese intellectual elites finally resulted in a state that should be highlighted in the conclusion to this chapter.

The present literary system does not need a physical 'censor' or even institutionalized censorship, because the authors, publishers, editors, as well as other parts of the literary field, now including even the broad masses of readers, have been largely incorporated into the official system, have accepted political or academic functions and are motivated to keep within the limits of the system to maintain their social and economic status.

In other words, the original antagonism between author and censor has been in the practice of the Chinese system already overcome and, paraphrasing Butler's words, 'the subject who is censored' has through 'the agency of restrictive and productive power' become one with 'the subject who censors' (1998: 247), which applies even to the recipients of such works. Only a few would transgress the line, and if they do, it is often an intentional, conscious step. For many readers, this kind of 'soft censorship' is almost invisible, because it has become less violent and less obvious. Compared to the 1980s, writers tend to moderate the risks more carefully, also with regard to readers, in a process of constant negotiation. As the analyzed examples show, (self)censorship is applied in every single step of the process of production and reception, from choosing a topic, geographical and historical setting, to characters and particular motives of each work, and all segments of the literary field actively participate. Nevertheless, while in general sticking to the monologic official master narrative affirming their participation in the system, writers frequently use their own forms of 'Aesopean language' to represent the untouchable empty spaces – gaps in personal and collective memories and between personal expression and CCP ideology.

Notes

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2 Translations from Chinese and other languages into English, if not indicated otherwise, are my own.
3 One of the works criticized for 'pornographic content' was, for example, Jia Pingwa's (贾平凹) *Abandoned Capital* (废都, 1993), which has been compared to the famous classical socially critical novel featuring numerous erotic scenes *Jin Ping Mei*. Similarly, morally motivated censorship was applied to works of the so-called 'writing beauties' (美少女作家) such as Wei Hui (卫慧) or Mian Mian (棉棉).
4 Chinese 'civilizing missions' in the areas inhabited by non-Han ethnics are often compared to the Western colonial endeavor in Asia, Africa, and the Americas. The similarities have been brough up by Harrell (1995).
5 For a more detailed analysis of the short stories, see Hladíková (2013: 70–73).
6 四项基本原则: (1) adherence to the socialist road; (2) adherence to the democratic dictatorship of the people; (3) adherence to the leadership of the Communist Party; (4) adherence to Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought; (Barmé 1999: 384, note 41). These 'four principles' were announced in March 1979 in an anti-liberalist campaign against the democratic movement around the 'democracy wall' in Beijing.
7 As argued by Hladíková (2013: 213), the attributed 'mysteriousness' of Tibet and Tibetan religion and culture is one of the manifestations of (Western) orientalist fantasies about Tibet, but at the same time of Chinese 'internal orientalism' (Schein 2000) that gave birth to Tibetan 'magical realism' as a product of the Chinese colonial presence in Tibet. Emphasizing Tibet's 'otherness' and perceived impossibility to modernize can be interpreted as a metaphorical expression of the uneven power relations between the two cultures.
8 In a recent example of much discussed *Wuhan Diary* (武汉日记) by a senior female writer Fang Fang (方方, b. 1955), former high-ranking official of the Chinese Writers' Association, it was not even the authorities who incited the condemnation of the book – a personal diary from the period of Wuhan's coronavirus lockdown – but rather the ultra-leftist nationalist netizens on social media, who blamed the author, saying that she was 'providing bullets to the enemy/the imperialists'.

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