

Profile

Wang Tuo

In a climate of state censorship of the arts, the Beijing-based Chinese artist challenges the limits of what is possible with intelligence, humour and courage.



The Second Interrogation, 2023, video installation

After Wang Tuo opened 'The Second Interrogation' at Hong Kong's Blindspot Gallery in March this year, people reached out to see if the artist was in danger. Among the concerns was the show's titular centerpiece, *The Second Interrogation*, 2023, a two-part video installation that orbits the legacy of 'China/Avant-Garde'. That landmark exhibition opened at the National Art Museum in Beijing in February 1989, only months before Tiananmen Square became the focal point of a student-led movement that called for political reforms in China and culminated in the state's crackdown on 4 June that year.

The first part of *The Second Interrogation* stages a conversation between an unnamed Chinese artist and a state censor in the present day. The exchange begins at a public talk in which the artist introduces seven 'rogue' performances - referred to as the 'Seven Sins' by filmmaker Wen Pullin - that took place during the opening of 'China/Avant-Garde'. These interventions, which included Li Shan washing his feet in a red plastic basin covered in images of Ronald Reagan's face (*The Second Interrogation* restages the intervention with Mao's visage), culminated with Xiao Lu firing a gun at her installation of two phone booths, *Dialogue*. 'After those two gunshots was that cold summer when people took to the streets and disappeared', the censor remembers in Wang's film as black-and-white photographs of Tiananmen protestors come into view. This alone would be enough to trigger unease in today's post-National Security Law Hong Kong, where commemorating the June Fourth Incident has become increasingly policed.

But there's more. The two-channel video installation is presented on two standing walls positioned in a chevron, making it hard to catch every word. While one person speaks aloud on one screen, the other retreats into their thoughts on the other. Tactics of interrogation emerge throughout this exchange. When the censor asks the audience if an artist hiding their 'position' reveals their 'cunning', the artist on stage goes quiet. He thinks about circumventing 'certain words' or stopping 'at a certain point' when exploring 'social issues' in his work, and reflects on the art world's 'tacit boundaries of capital and power' capitulating revolution into resignation. A close-up of the artist's face cuts to a longshot from behind and the spotlight illuminating his profile plunges his body into shadow, as if to visualise how little he is revealing. When the artist finally speaks aloud, he resorts to flattery - 'if only the audience of Chinese contemporary art was as sharp as you' - before inviting the censor to discuss his questions in private.

The pair continue talking in a private room over tea - invited for tea being a euphemism for state questioning in China - in which they uncover their similarities. From their tactics - 'Hasn't your identity and mine both become a disguise?' the artist asks - to their concerns for what the censor calls 'the system that has betrayed its promise'. Soon, mirroring gives way to inversion. Describing the 'seven sins' as being symbolic of a myopic impatience that interrupted institutional



The Second Interrogation, 2023, video installation



Tungus, 2021, video

reform and invited further state suppression, the artist seems attached to his survival within the system while the censor becomes increasingly troubled by the tyranny of stasis.

With that in mind, part one's ending feels more incendiary than any protest image. 'Sometimes when you struggle in a system and have not become completely numb, you should stop believing in rationality,' the censor says, weary from decades in the field. The camera then stares down the barrel of a gun in reference to Xiao Lu's performance in 1989, recalling the irrationality of the act, which foreshadowed the events that followed, and Wang's invitation to look at the 'seven sins' as 'a tunnel to question if it's about time to continue what we Chinese didn't accomplish 30 years ago'.

That question continues in part two. The single-channel video follows the same artist now directing a group of performers inside a space where black banners cascade down a wall, each emblazoned with the iconic 'No U-Turn' symbol that appeared on 'China/Avant-Garde' posters like political insignia. A conversation between the ghosts of two artists narrates these scenes: one is shown to overdose in the film, and the other is cloaked in a white sheet like Datong Dazhang, who dressed up as a ghost as part of the performances for 'China/Avant Garde' and who killed himself on 1 January 2000. They reflect on the legacy of the May Fourth Movement, which was named after the student-led protests in Beijing that erupted in 1919 against an international agreement transferring German-controlled Shandong to Japan after the First World War. The spirits describe this historic struggle for China's self-determination as 'an earthquake that would last for hundreds of years'.

Ruminating on historical spectres of authoritarianism and failed revolution, the ghosts lament the conditions of fear that turn 'victims' into 'perpetrators' and 'fellows' into 'informers' - where 'the decision between compromise and complicity, silence and self-interest, is not just the result of the institution's discipline but also the individual's nihilism'. Eventually, they agree that 'to decide how to live is the original "power of the powerless"' - a weapon in 'everyone's hands' that forms 'an unspoken social network' like an 'untraceable guerrilla warfare'. As they speak, the group's movements become more unruly. The censor appears and begins to separate the melee before pointing a gun at the artist, as if in desperate confusion, and then up to the ceiling. 'Perhaps, a real revolution will come,' the ghosts conclude, in a script written with daring precision, 'because people, after generations of solitary questioning, truly understand what belongs to them and how to own it.'

Wang has never shown *The Second Interrogation* in mainland China and has no plans to do so. Especially now that *Tungus*, 2021, which forms part of 'The Northeast Tetralogy' series, 2018-21, was recently censored in a group show in Shanghai. Indicating the shifting political climate, the work had previously been shown in that city and elsewhere in the country, including at UCCA in Beijing as part of the artist's 2021 solo exhibition 'Empty-handed into History'.

Perhaps one issue with *Tungus* lies in its anchoring to the artist's hometown Changchun, the capital of Jilin province in northeast China, which was formerly the capital of Japanese-occupied Manchukuo and part of the Russian concession known as the Chinese Eastern Railway Zone. In 1948, during the Chinese

Civil War, Changchun, a base for the Kuomintang's army, came under siege by the People's Liberation Army, plunging its inhabitants into famine. In the film, two soldiers from the PLA's Korean Independent Division wander a snowscape looking for the city, but at times find themselves on Jeju Island, where an uprising against Korea's partition was violently suppressed by the US-backed Republic of Korea army in 1949. Woven into their journey are scenes of an ageing scholar starving to death in Changchun, who remembers the lost promise of the May Fourth Movement before ending his own life.

Wang says that *Tungus* stemmed from a friend's book about the Changchun siege, which was 'of course published outside of China' along with other publications. While making the film, he learned that his author friend was sentenced to life in prison. 'We talk about this,' Wang says, alluding to the conversations people often have in an attempt to measure when public expression becomes a risk to freedom and how much freedom is worth losing. Of course, artists in China have dealt with this for millennia, Wang points out. Consider the stories of scholars so disillusioned with court life that they retreated into nature so that a poem apparently about a mountain is never solely that. 'We still rely on metaphors and rhetoric,' Wang notes. 'When I try to talk about histories with a long time-span between them, I have to use parallel narrative methodologies' to create 'confrontations with otherwise distant objects'.

Showing *The Second Interrogation* in Hong Kong was one such confrontation: an encounter between still-unfolding histories that tie Hong Kong and China together. Extending this confrontation was the screening of *The Interrogation*, 2017, as part of Art Basel Hong Kong's 2023 film programme, curated by Li Zhenhua, which took place in parallel to Wang's exhibition opening. In a sequence of still images, an agent recounts the experience of being interviewed by the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection: a department responsible for enforcing internal rules and regulations, as well as anti-corruption, in the CCP. The work is based on discussions with someone Wang knows at the commission, just as *The Second Interrogation* is based on Wang's experiences with cultural censorship - he describes one agent who likes and shares his social media posts.

Wang observes that conditions such as these have become somewhat normalised in China, and artists have learned how to deal with them; a view that might help explain why he felt people in Hong Kong overreacted when they asked about his safety after seeing his show. Hong Kong is the one place where it made sense for him to present *The Second Interrogation*; an intervention that functioned as both a litmus test and an act of space-making. 'I think Hong Kong is important,' Wang says, observing that the situation has become riskier in China, not only because of the authorities, but because of a growing nationalism where people might call you a traitor for critiquing the system. But Wang sees similar dynamics of surveillance elsewhere: the phenomenon of civilians doing the state's work by policing one another is certainly not limited to China.

Stephanie Bailey is a writer and editor from Hong Kong.