
Censorship in a Chinese Publishing Context: Catalyst or Curtailment? A Case Study Involving Jung Chang's *Wild Swans*

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Abstract

The purpose of this journal article is to critically analyse censorship theories in relation to modern publishing and book history studies. The emphasis will be on censorship in relation to modern China, and the way in which Chinese writers are restricted in an age which places huge prominence on the importance of freedom of speech. The methodology focuses on a case study examining Jung Chan's *Wild Swans* (1991) which exemplifies the way in which the Chinese government has censored material revealing life under, and since, the Mao Communist regime. This family history details the lives of three generations of women in Chan's family, including the author, throughout the 20th century, and is a significant example of the sorts of issues encountered by Chinese writers wishing to tell their stories.

Censorship in publishing is addressed in relation to important theories of censorship, such as Foucault's repressive hypothesis (1976) and Butler's theories surrounding discourse, identity and performance (1997). This work will critique and apply these theories to illustrate the consequences of censorship in relation to contemporary struggles for freedom of expression in China and the rest of the world. This topic has not been addressed in an academic framework to a great extent, in relation to the publishing industry. Therefore, this article also offers an examination of the implications of the lack of academic insight into censorship in China, in relation to freedom of speech, the Chinese publishing industry, and the rest of the world.

Keywords: Censorship, China, *Wild Swans*, Jung Chang, Judith Butler, Michel Foucault

Article

In her preface to the 21st anniversary edition of *Wild Swans*, Jung Chang states:

This is an occasion both happy and sad for me - happy because a new generation of readers has grown up and is enjoying it, and sad because the book is still banned in Mainland China. Over the past 20 years, China has been through exciting changes. But portraying its recent history truthfully still remains taboo. I wonder how many more decades it will be before *Wild Swans* can fly freely in my native land, where my mother, now 80, still lives. (Jung Chang, 2012: xiii)

Indeed, this case study of *Wild Swans*, a family history of three generations of women in Chang's family, is explored in relation to the censorship theories of Butler and Foucault, in order to explore the implications this example of Chinese censorship has for the publishing industry in China and the rest of the world. Censorship has long been problematic in China, although "no published Chinese source acknowledges the existence of censorship after 1949" (Yi, 1997: 569). Moreover, *Wild Swans* was published at a time when the Chinese government was keen to reassert their power and influence over the publishing industry:

By the end of the decade [the 1980s], the publishing trade was in a state of confusion. The government still retained a weakened mechanism of control and threatened constant intervention, while the book market managed to go its own way by sidestepping the restrictions. (Yi, 1997: 577)

In 1989, the Chinese government was to introduce a Temporary Regulation on Defining Obscene and Pornographic Publications, and there was a huge crack down on censored and black market material, with many booksellers closing. The Chinese government even controlled the supply of paper to publishing houses in an attempt to force businesses to comply with their social norms and encourage co-operation. *Wild Swans* was arguably published at a time when censorship in China was experiencing a revival. However, the book "has been published in 37 languages and sold more than 13 million copies (while still banned in mainland China)." (Jung Chang's Website, 2013). It is therefore questionable as to whether censorship prevents freedom of information or whether it merely does so in a particular cultural domain.

In terms of publishing culture, censorship is often seen as a derogatory term, associated with ignorance and the prevention of freedom of information and expression. It often reflects a repressive culture with the silencing of critics and marginal voices, and is generally deemed an unacceptable aspect of a free society. However, while censorship per se is problematic, taking an overly simplistic view of censorship ignores its potential as a catalyst for discourse, which can be seen as a product of individuals who wish to distort social expectations and regulations that curtail their freedom of speech. Indeed, Butler argues:

Censorship is most often referred to as that which is directed against persons or against the content of their speech. If censorship, however, is a way of *producing* speech, constraining in advance what will and what will not become acceptable speech, then it cannot be understood exclusively in terms of juridical power. In the conventional view, censorship appears to follow the utterance of offensive speech: speech has already become offensive, and then some recourse to a regulatory agency is made. But in the view that suggests that censorship *produces* speech, the temporal relation is inverted. Censorship precedes the text (by which I include "speech" and other cultural expressions), and is in some sense responsible for its production. (1997: 128)

Censorship exists because of discourse surrounding topics which are seen to avoid or even retaliate against social norms imposed by authoritative institutions. It is simplistic to argue that censorship is a purely negative and totalitarian response to individual expression, although exploring the idea that censorship is productive rather than reductive is problematic in itself. If censorship is examined in relation to discourse, the fact it is often successful in suppressing a Western view of freedom of speech, can be ignored, as it is presented as a productive force. Every text is subject to a certain amount of censorship, in that there are always conditions under which something is written, partly prescribed by those in positions of authority, but also by the writer's own motivations and expectations in terms of reception and response. This relates to Butler's idea that censorship produces speech as it stipulates a particular environment or discourse in which certain utterances are acceptable where others are not. In doing so, censorship *encourages* deviation as its restrictive nature produces discourse which seeks to challenge cultural authority. Moreover, in terms of Chang's experiences, censorship encouraged her to explore possibilities beyond those which were sanctioned by those in positions of power, and question why material was being censored to begin with.

Foucault also explores the idea that censorship is the result of discourse and also produces it:

But it is here that one imagines a sort of logical sequence that characterizes censorship mechanisms: it links the inexistent, the illicit, and the inexpressible in such a way that each is at the same time the principle and the effect of the others: one must not talk about what is forbidden until it is annulled in reality; what is inexistent has no right to show itself, even in the order of speech where its inexistence is declared; and that which one must keep silent about it banished from reality as the thing that is tabooed above all else. (1979: 84)

Indeed, in relation to Jung Chang's *Wild Swans*, her work was censored because it encouraged discourse surrounding Mao's regime. However her motivation to write came from an awareness of the censorship she had been a victim of, and the knowledge she wished to impart on others. In relation to Foucault's arguments, the censoring of her work created a reality for it and for the censorship curtailing it. The fact that her work was forced into a realm of inexistence merely creates a discourse exposing this, even if the act is attempting to produce the opposite effect. As Heath discusses "For Foucault and his followers, censorship is productive rather than (or rather than purely) repressive" (2007: 510). Censorship is endemic in society as it is a way for institutions in positions of authority to deal with knowledge. Publishers, especially because they are state owned, are a means for those in positions of power in China to monitor what is published and whether it should be censored according to their criteria. Interestingly, this goes against a Western view of the publisher as someone who engages with material and works towards exposing it to the widest possible readership. Chinese publishers are part of the mechanism that allows the authorities to alter the reality in which a text exists.

Despite this, Butler and Foucault fail to recognise that although censorship can be a catalyst for discourse, in countries such as China, it has been successful in silencing writers. Indeed, China was ranked 174 out of 179 countries in the Worldwide Index of Press Freedom (Reporters without Borders 2012), and Chinese legislation is extremely strict when it comes to publishing new works. The General Administration of Press and Publication is a screening body for all literature that is published in China, and Chinese publishers must be licensed by this organisation as it is required by law. Moreover, Chinese censorship of the internet is both topical and controversial, with the 2010 White Paper stating how Chinese authorities wished to "curb the harmful effects of illegal information of state security, public interests and children" (BBC, 2010).

However, Butler and Foucault's theories are useful in examining *Wild Swans* as a modern case study into censorship in the Chinese publishing industry. There is a significant link between censored material in China, and the way in which the discourse surrounding that

can actually lead to the published work being more successful and widely read on an international scale. Chen Yi discusses the case of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* in China and describes it as "a prime example of popularity boosted by censorship, and the banning of the Chinese translation sharply raised the book's price in the country's black market and excited wider interest in the novel" (1992: 574). This concurs with both Foucault's and Butler's theories, in that the discourse surrounding the censoring of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* meant that a wider readership became interested. In writing *Wild Swans*, which Chang knew included material that would be unacceptable to the Chinese government, Chang and the institution that censored her work created a discourse that the West became aware of, which led to the greatly increased popularity of her book. Butler argues:

Never fully separable from what it seeks to censor, censorship is implicated in its own repudiated material in ways that produce paradoxical consequences. If censoring a text is always in some ways incomplete, that may be partly because the text in question takes on new life as part of the very discourse produced by the mechanism of censorship. (1997: 130)

Creating a discourse of censorship is against censorship as it renews the text being censored as something worth reading. Chang's text did indeed take on a new life following the discourse created by its censorship, although this could be revealing about her motivations. Hockx, a professor of Chinese at the University of London, states "some Chinese authors seek bans as a shortcut to a foreign publisher. Some even pretend to be banned when, in fact, the Chinese government has paid them no attention" (The Telegraph Online, 2007). Chinese writers show an awareness of the environment in which they write, and the response of Western publishers to the censoring of their work. Material that has been deemed controversial in China is appealing to an international readership in terms of the content of the text, but also the implications surrounding this, in that China is a society the West is trying to understand (but on its own terms). Chang wrote knowing that her material would be censored in her homeland of China. However, the nature of her book meant that in order to express freely what she wanted to report on, she would have to accept censorship in China upon publication. Gordimer argues:

What is a writer's freedom? To me it is his right to maintain and publish to the world a deep, intense, private view of the situation in which he finds his society... His integrity as a writer goes the moment he begins to write what he ought to write. (1984: 134-135)

Chang wrote in an environment where those in authority sought to subdue the discourse surrounding her work. However, she wrote with an integrity that revealed her truth, and despite the censoring of this, she contributed to the discourse surrounding published

material censored in China. Censorship is arguably a catalyst which occurs in a particular domain or environment which houses various social norms and expectations. However, this again ignores the fact that many writers in China fail to be published in China or the rest of the world, due to censorship legislation imposed by the government. Chang has been extremely successful, although this is arguably very unusual for a Chinese writer who has been censored according to Chinese law. The powerful and interesting story is also a contributory factor in the novel's success, but its intriguing nature as a censored novel adds to its mystique. Moreover, despite the significance of censorship in terms of the publishing industry in China, and the implications this has in terms of authoritative power and discourse, there has been very little academic exploration into how censorship has affected Chinese writers and the publication of their work in their home country. This is revealing of the institutional context in which the publishing industry is operating within, and the consequences academics and critics might face if they were to attempt to examine this issue more.

Indeed, Butler states:

Censorship is a productive form of power: it is not merely privative but formative as well. I propose that censorship seeks to produce subjects according to explicit and implicit norms, and that the production of the subject has everything to do with the regulation of speech. The subject's production takes place not only through the regulation of that subject's speech, but the regulation of the social domain of speakable discourse. The question is not what I will be able to say, but what will constitute the domain of the sayable within which I begin to speak at all. (1997: 133)

The domain of the sayable in this case partly relates to the publishing industry in China, and the way in which the authorities have influence over this. This also relates to Bourdieu's theories of social and symbolic capital, in that institutions control those individuals who can assert or acquire these in a Chinese publishing context when they feel threatened (2002: 81). Brink argues:

It is a cliché, but one which cannot be repeated too often, that censorship is not primarily a literary, or even a moral institution, but part of the apparatus of political power: more specifically, of political power veering towards the totalitarian, and finding itself threatened from within. (1984: 142)

Chang clearly posed a threat to the institution responsible for the stifled political environment in China, and in response to this, they curtailed her freedom of speech and the freedom of the potential individuals who may have engaged with it.

Despite the fact Chang has enjoyed huge success around the world, *Wild Swans* has still not been published in her native China:

In 1993, there was actually a possibility that *Wild Swans* might get published there... A Chinese publisher had typeset it, though with certain cuts of the parts relating to Mao, but then the censor said no.... and today my books are very strictly banned. Ironically, the clampdown is the result of more freedom, which is the result of the web. That is much harder for them to control so they are trying to stay a step ahead of this freedom and at the same time clamp down harder on printed matter. (London Evening Standard Online, 2012)

The idea that the internet has further curtailed freedom of speech in China is astonishing, as, in the West, it is associated with freedom of information and an online community with the opportunity to access material freely. It will be interesting to monitor the way in which new developments in technology affect social norms surrounding censorship in China and the authoritative institutions who are attempting to prevent the internet being used in the way that the West enjoys. Censorship is not only the censoring of print matter, published formally by a publishing house, but also relates to the discourse surrounding this production of material, in a social, political and moral context. Censorship can define the way in which an institution responds to discourse and speech (including text), and exposes them as a force against a free society. Moreover, censorship legislation can lead to self-censorship, with many writers and publishers in China writing in a way that avoids conflict with Chinese censorship laws, despite the fact this may tarnish their professional integrity.

To conclude, theories of censorship can be complex and problematic. Both Foucault and Butler refer to censorship not just as a derogatory term that evokes control and the stifling of individual speech, but as a product of a discourse that exists surrounding this. Despite the negative connotations, censorship can also be seen as a catalyst for discourse and a way for writers to engage in a discourse that allows their work to reach a wider readership. Chang has recently wrote a biography of Mao and "not surprisingly, Mao won't be published there [in China] either, though Chang is working on a Chinese translation and is confident that, like *Wild Swans*, it will find its way in. It is being published in Taiwan and, she hopes, in Hong Kong." (The Guardian Online, 2005) However, despite the fact that China continues to censor material, in doing so it contributes to a discourse surrounding the reasons for this and the implications this has for the future. Future academic work may want to address the way in which the publishing industry in China is changing, with foreign publishers keen to become more involved in a rising economy, and how institutions respond to this. Foucault and Butler both suggest that censorship occurs in relation to social norms. However, their

arguments ignore the fact that censorship in China has stifled freedom of speech and information, despite the success of a small number of Chinese writers publishing abroad. Ultimately, if social norms in China changed, it would be interesting to examine the implications this may have for publishing material that may once have been censored or published only outside writers' home nation of China.

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