



# THE ~~WALL~~ ON THE WALL: CENSORSHIP IN HONG KONG

*Written by Griffin Suber*

*When a woman was nearly blinded by a beanbag round during the Hong Kong protests last year, fellow demonstrators raised over \$25,000 to build a 13-foot tall statue with her likeness. They called it 'Lady Liberty Hong Kong' and set it atop a nearby outlook, where the statue was then destroyed and splattered with red paint by unknown vandalers. This, however, is only one of many willful disobediences made against the Chinese government. One of the most widespread works, 'Our Vantage' by Harcourt Romanticist, reimagines Western revolutionaries as gas-masked protesters, wielding umbrellas instead of bayoneted rifles in a romantic charge against riot police. Covering the walls of downtown battlegrounds, a mass-produced poster depicts a mother lovingly placing a yellow helmet on her son before a demonstration, as if it were the first day of school. Another poster shows Chinese President Xi Jinping and Hong Kong's chief executive Carrie Lam in an intimate embrace, making out like high schoolers at a basement party.*

With local museums and galleries shying away from polarizing subjects, artists turned to the streets to enjoy a resistance renaissance, using walls, plywood, and the pavement itself to commandeer a canvas from the chaos. Now, every poster or dissenting mural has been torn down or bleached. The mainland is pushing back on what it sees as widespread separatism, forcing artists and activists to fight for the right to resist at all.

On June 30, 2020, China's top lawmakers unanimously passed a new national security law that would impose strict standards on expression in Hong Kong. The law completely leap-frogged Hong Kong's local legislature, and aims to ban sedition, secession, and subversion of China's central government. These terms are defined so broadly, however, that simply tagging a protest motto or having a picture on your phone of a political mural could mean heavy penalties.

According to Amnesty International, Hongkongers have already been arrested for possessing flags, stickers, and banners with political slogans. Libraries have begun to set aside books on "sensitive" issues and residents are panic-buying political titles, as they did with rice and toilet paper in the early days of the pandemic. If this law follows in the footsteps of its big brother paragon in mainland China, artists and activists could face censorship, intimidation, and jail time for expressing views counter to the establishment. While these consequences exist in China, artists living outside the country have found ways to continue the fight for liberation.

Badiucao (pronounced *ba-doo-chow*) is a Chinese painter and political cartoonist currently based in Melbourne, Australia. He left China ten years ago, ditching his original plan to become a lawyer. Instead, Badiucao has become an outspoken proponent of freedom of speech and artistic activism. Badiucao wears his ideals on his sleeve; he has a tattoo depicting the Tiananmen Square massacre, the ultimate symbol of Chinese censorship, on his right arm – the arm he uses to draw.

By appropriating the red and black, hammer and sickle-style utilized by Communist propaganda, Badiucao says his art intends to remind his countrymen of their past, while using the regime's weapons against them. He posts his cartoons on Twitter and Instagram, which are banned in mainland China, though savvy fans are able to bypass the so-called Great Firewall, an internet censorship system put in place to control domestic and foreign speech within China, and spread his lampoons throughout the country. Thus, Badiucao became a political target.

"It's really exciting as an artist, that my art could literally be news for people demonstrating in the streets," said Badiucao. "The Hong Kong situation feels very intimate to me because I was supposed to have a show in Hong Kong at the end of 2018, and the show got canceled because the national security police in China found out my identity. Before that I was practicing anonymously."

For years, Badiucao attended galleries and sat for interviews disguised in a "face-kini," a ski mask-esque face



cover worn by Chinese beachgoers seeking to preserve their pale skin. When we spoke, it was through an encrypted app equipped with self-destructing messages and secure connections. Because of its ability to host large private groups, it's one of the same apps that allows Hong Kong's leaderless protesters to coordinate meetups.

Badiucao's canceled 2018 exhibition was a prologue for the protests and crackdowns to come. It was a high-profile event, hosted in collaboration with the Hong Kong Free Press, Amnesty International, and Reporters Without Borders. Pussy Riot was set to perform. Suddenly, Badiucao called it all off after receiving word that his family living in China had been arrested.

"Oh, the message was clear. Cancel the show or you and your family will be in trouble. They did it three days before the show. I think it's a very carefully orchestrated strategy—it just caught me in the middle of nowhere and I had no time to think about it." This changed the trajectory of Badiucao's life and was the first blatant clampdown on an art show in Hong Kong. Six months later, the anti-extradition protests were in full swing.

ART BY @insertname

PHOTO BY @insertname

What does it mean when a government is afraid of art? What does it say when a government doesn't bother to deflect criticism, gives up on the age-old tradition of spin, and chooses instead to silence and punish?

"I think it's just like any totalitarian regime," says Badiucao. "It's their policy towards culture. It's not because they're afraid of art, they actually know art is quite a powerful tool. So, they want it to be totally controlled by them only and that's why they do not tolerate that this power be shared with individuals. The logic is that they believe they are the most right people in the universe. Anything they say is justified... criticism is not necessary."

a satisfied trophy hunter. Another shows yellow helmet protesters raising their flag, Iwo Jima style, atop Mount Winnie. "The absurdity in and of itself causes problems for the censorship," he says. "When the system wants to ban Winnie the Pooh, it's questioned. Why is this forbidden? By associating the most popular images with political meaning, there's a formula there. If it is as common as water or air, then it's not censorable."

To avoid leaving a digital breadcrumb trail for the authorities, Hongkongers have been posting their frustrations on various "Lennon Walls" across the city. The original Lennon Wall in Prague used guerilla street art to express the democratic preferences of a people living under Commu-

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To nip criticism in the bud, regimes like China's use AI algorithms to sift through endless internet articles, posts, and comments, hunting for forbidden keywords as part of the Great Firewall's limitation of free speech. For a while, art was a way to beat the censors. Images couldn't be hunted as easily as phrases, so authorities could only find unfavorable content by manually combing through millions of posts or by waiting for something to be reported. But as the AI gets better at identifying illustrations and pictures, Badiucao has leaned into another strategy: bundling iconic pop culture figures with political messages.

Years ago, some unknown Twitter users pointed out that President Xi Jinping looks like Winnie the Pooh. The comparison went viral, but Xi couldn't take the joke and Winnie has since been verboten from all Chinese media – movies, toys, everything. Ever since, Badiucao has used Winnie the Pooh to represent this new wave of rigid censorship. One of Badiucao's cartoons shows President Xi posing atop Winnie's corpse, rifle in hand, as would

nist rule. To channel their Western protesting counterpart, they would graffiti Lennon's face and lyrics to a specific wall. When the work was buffed, it was always replaced by the next morning. Lennon Walls have been a staple of past and present Hong Kong protests, consisting mainly of post-it notes containing anonymous messages that would be problematic to post online.

"The squares started as just random messages, then they started to develop into pixel art of memes like the Pepe Frog or Winnie the Pooh," says Badiucao. In this way, the collective free expression of a population fit together like a puzzle to form its own art. The checkered post-it notes came to represent the movement and Badiucao even designed a flag to symbolize this prismatic collection of opinions. Badiucao has sponsored sympathetic Lennon Walls in Melbourne, Berlin, Washington, DC, and other cities around the world to draw attention to Hong Kong's fight.

For Badiucao, focusing on art that is non-political is a luxury enjoyed only by those in a country where freedom of

speech already exists. “I know people will argue that art should be for the sake of art, art has nothing to do with politics, blah, blah, blah. We are entering this new world disorder now, everything is crumbling, China, America, Brexit, refugee crisis in Europe – everything is happening. And I just cannot believe that artists feel okay hiding in their own studio and making things only satisfying for themselves or the very limited so-called art community. I think it’s completely wrong.”

The crackdown on expression and the carpet banning of popular protest slogans such as “Liberate Hong Kong, Revolution of Our Times” created yet another hurdle for the protestors to face in order to spread their message. In many eastern cultures, white is the color of mourning, so demonstrators now hold up blank sheets of paper as an act of dissent. This simple act amplifies their silence and satirizes the cat and mouse game of censorship.

All around the city, murals, tags, and protest slogans were unceremoniously buffed. A patchwork of sloppy white and grey paint strokes redacting the revolution. Giraffe Leung, a 27-year old Hong Kong artist, looked around and concluded that the sloppy cover-ups were the perfect metaphor for the government’s reaction to people’s concerns. He began a collection called *Paper Over the Cracks* in February 2020, where he framed these “scars of the protests” with bright yellow adhesive tape, complete with accompanying artwork label.

“The repair works are attempts by the government to paper over the cracks, but it was such a half-hearted effort, just like their governance,” Leung said “The things that the government is cleaning up are only on the surface, they have little intention to solve the underlying issues.”

Like the white sheets of paper, framing a whitewashed wall recycles censorship itself to make a statement. In a time when news cycles move at a dizzying clip and social movements trend for their fifteen minutes before returning to obscurity, the idea behind *Paper Over the Cracks* is “don’t forget.” The concept has since taken on a life of its own with dozens of copycat framings popping up all over Hong Kong. “We can’t get used to all these strange things in our society,” Leung tells me. “I put up the adhesive tape to remind people to pay attention to things around them. To be honest, I am not too afraid of this new security law, because if I am afraid, I will not be able to do anything.”

It is a constant battle between the artists and government of China. When one step is taken in the direction of revolution, whether it be “Lady Liberty Hong Kong” or the Winnie the Pooh renditions of President Xi Jinping, the footprint is quickly eradicated. It may seem like each protest does not amount to much, but they are important to retain the voice of the people. Like flowers attempting to find sunlight in a world that constantly buries them back into the dirt, there has to be hope that one day they will flourish. Art, like hope, finds a way. □



**IN A TIME WHEN NEWS CYCLES MOVE AT A DIZZYING CLIP AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS TREND FOR THEIR FIFTEEN MINUTES BEFORE RETURNING TO OBSCURITY, THE IDEA BEHIND PAPER OVER THE CRACKS IS “DON’T FORGET.”**