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IMPRISONED FOR AN IDEA — DISSIDENT ARTIST LIN BO SPEAKS OUT ABOUT A CRIME OF CONSCIENCE IN CHINA

By Joyce Heleena Curto

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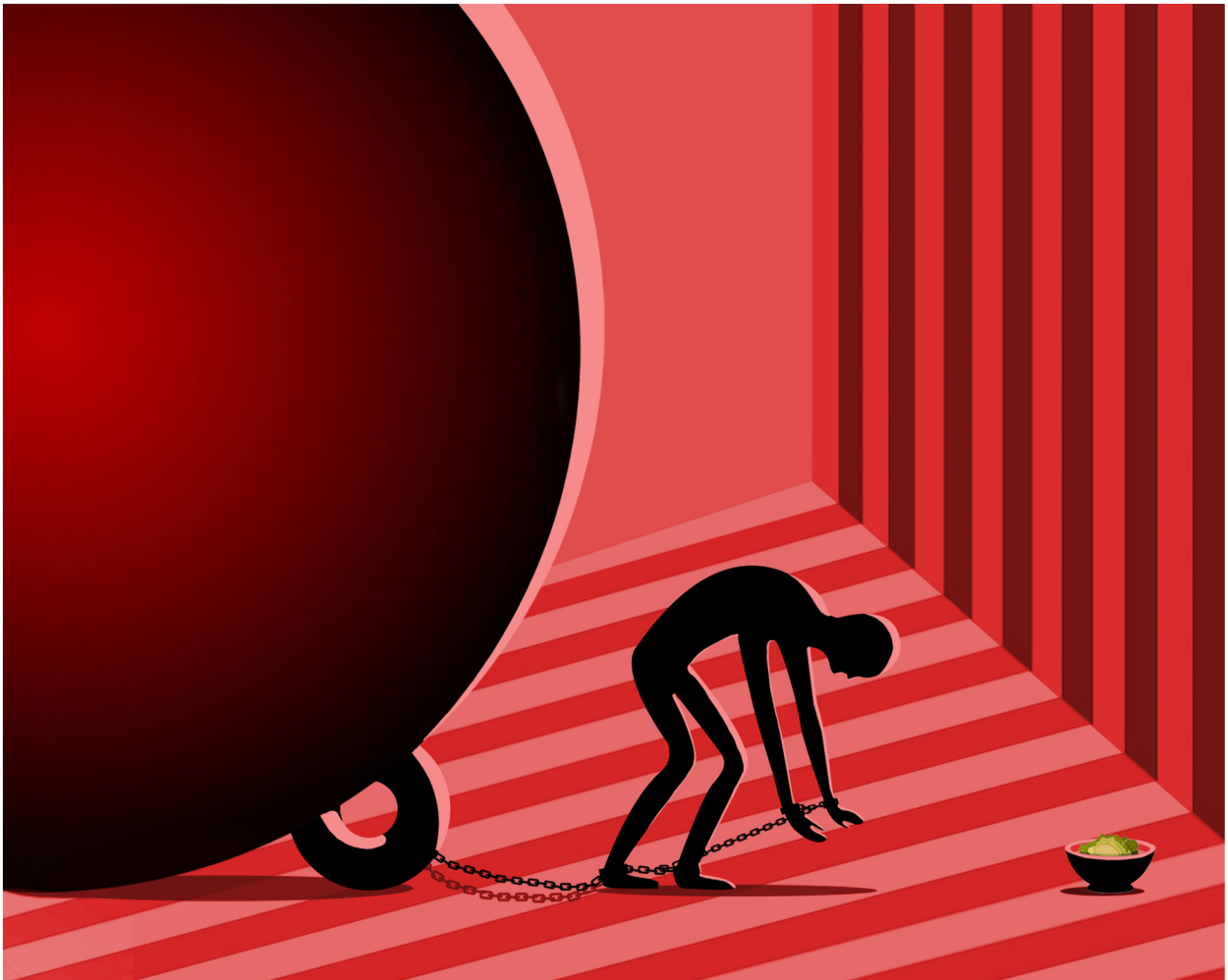


Illustration by Zachary Nerbinsky

How dangerous is an idea? “Very,” according to conceptual artist, Lin Bo. In the United States, we take freedom of speech as a given right. Yet in other parts of the world, people live in a state of fear that their ideas might be deemed unacceptable. For some, the very act of expressing an idea may land them in prison for crimes of conscience. Such acts of injustice can be traced all the way back to Galileo, who was imprisoned for claiming the ‘fact’ that the sun was the center of the universe. This, in essence, is what happened to Lin Bo.

The dissident now sits across from me at Café Mogador in the East Village on the first anniversary of his escape from the Chinese detention center that held him captive for two years. Face hardened from years of mistreatment – but eyes still bright with purpose – he slowly sips his tea as he recounts his story.

Lin belongs to a group of renegade artists who call themselves the Xiong Collective. With roots in Beijing’s legendary 798 Art District, they share an aesthetic of boundary-pushing artwork critical of the regime. Lin avoids being didactic, but indicates a certain displeasure about the current state of 798 Art District. It has “lost the essence of subversion,” he says. Nevertheless, the iconic district continues to serve as one of few symbols of rebellion in the state.



798 Space Gallery. Old Maoist slogans are visible on the ceiling arches.

Photograph by Zhang Yu/ NYT / Redux

Lin believes that “all modern suppression in China can be traced back to the 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre.” It is a contentious subject that does not always factor into

China's written history. Documentation is scarce, and what little does exist severely underplays the 'truth' of the incident. Numbers claimed as 'fact' vary according to the source they are reported in. Many artists are placed under house arrest near its anniversary to deter attempts at commemoration. Lin Bo's mentor – Yu Rong, reputedly one of the original dissidents behind 798 Art District, and a Xiong founding member – had endured the suffocation of yearly house arrest for a decade.

At the time of the protest, Lin Bo was 16: idealistic, yet unable to actively partake in the movement. He fervently recalls friends who did, many of whom gave their lives for the cause. Among the lives lost was Lin's neighbor, who had introduced him to the world of artistic expression. He remembers the student from Hong Kong only as "Chang," but vividly recalls the enthusiasm with which he would share works in progress, patiently working through naive questions about the "point" of his work. Despite this loss, Lin cannot help but chuckle, noting with irony, "over the past 25 years or so, I have had to field these exact same questions regarding my own work."

In recent years, one element has become central to all of Lin's art: "building community through the ritual of creation." He continued, "if I can create art that exists only to disappear, why not art that never truly existed at all?" And so, after almost three decades, Lin found a way to reconnect the world to the legacy of Tiananmen. In a single act, he created a global community made by individuals in disparate locations participating in his art. The art work was an idea.



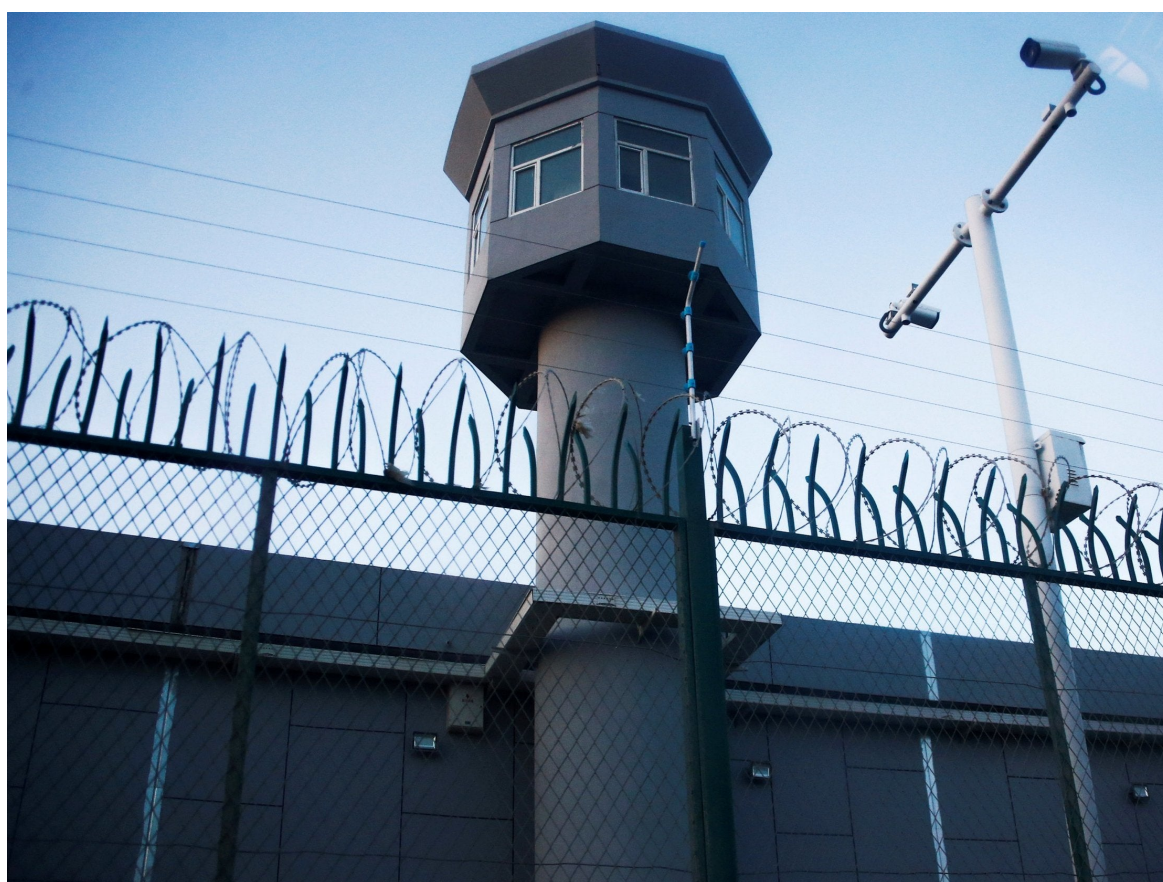
An image of Tiananmen Square, the inspiration behind Lin Bo's protest art.

Photograph by Zhang Yu/ NYT / Redux

In Orwellian fashion, the authorities immediately proclaimed the thought "a revolting crime". He was imprisoned without trial. Lin had questioned the authority structure, and they decided to make an example of him.

As Lin recounted his harrowing tale, I found it difficult to contain myself. When we hear stories about past experiences, it often feels far away. Face to face with the reality of Lin's experience, I had to confront my ignorance of the China he was revealing.

Throughout his time in Detention Center 7, he experienced severe mistreatment. He lived in an overcrowded cell with offenders of all sorts — some, merely petty criminals; others, rapists or murderers. They all wore shackles but some were also cuffed around the wrists. These cuffs were then attached to their shackles. "Their spines curved so unnaturally, they were curled up like shrimp," explained Lin. He goes into detail about the psychological damage of days on end spent damp and shivering in the open air cells. Almost fondly, he recalled the "oily cabbage soup topped with a single boiled vegetable for both lunch and dinner." Despite their malnutrition, the prisoners often disposed of their food down the toilet to keep the screaming rats at bay.



A guard watchtower rises along a perimeter fence of a detention center.

Photograph by Martha Schaffer / NYT / Redux

It is no wonder Lin lost his sense of purpose. It was not the physical chains that weighed him down, but "the psychological impacts of monotony and isolation from larger society." He began to lose himself. Days, weeks, and months blended into each other. His spirit crushed, he lost the impetus to create art, or to connect to the outside world.

Lin found solace in playing Da Shengji – a card game he discovered as a child – with other inmates. "During these games, we could forget our surroundings, just focus on the

competition. This is how I befriended fellow prisoners.” Once he started to feel connected to others, he rediscovered the power of the idea.

These moments of mental sanctuary were short-lived, overshadowed by monthly interrogations. “They wanted me to drop my guard, to feel some semblance of humanity again just before tearing me down once more,” he revealed. “They already knew everything, and still they tortured me,” he said.

Yet they could never fully subvert the revitalizing power of Da Shengji. Honing his mind, he gradually found the capacity to practice art once more. Inspired by his mentor, who sent him prompts for art even from prison, Lin kept fighting. Yu Rong *needed* his work to live on. Lin discovered: so did he.

Declining to elaborate on the details of his escape, Lin showed a protective zeal for the Xiong Collective members who helped him find a way. It was through their network of bloggers that I first came across Lin Bo’s story.

So how dangerous is an idea? Very, because it cannot be destroyed.



Joyce Heleena Curto began contributing to The New Yorker in 2011 and joined the magazine as a staff writer in 2016. She writes mainly about cross-cultural politics and has a special interest in trans-national identities.