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## **The Literary Inquisition: Controlling Words in Premodern China**

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Literary inquisition, or 文字獄 in Chinese, was a tool of political control applied by Emperors in premodern China comparable to modern Chinese censorship. Such method was practiced for over thousands of years (with a brief intermission during Tang Dynasty) to maintain control over civilians through ideological manipulation. In this paper, I will analyze the Literary Inquisition, the reasons for its foundation, and its influences in premodern China, with the focus on famous cases, including Crow Terrace Poetry Trial (烏台詩案 Wutai Shi An) of Su Shi 蘇軾 in 1267 during its formation period in Song Dynasty and the Case of Hu Zhongzao 胡中藻 in 1755 during its prevailing period in Qing Dynasty.

Modern Chinese government is infamous for its strict censorship. In recent years, China established the Great Firewall which prevents social media from the West, such as Facebook and Instagram, from entering the Chinese market landscape, claiming that “the restrictions are mostly about maintaining social order and safeguarding national security”

(GraClark, *Bloomberg.com*).<sup>1</sup> Viewed from a foreign perspective, it is difficult to understand the philosophy behind this Chinese Communist strategy, since freedom of speech is one of the core values of modern democracy. However, the origin of such censorship is not a modern philosophy constructed by the Communist Party. Modern censorship in China can only be understood through an understanding of the lengthy history of premodern China.

Literary inquisition, directly translated as “Prison of Words,” has origins that can be traced back to over two thousand years ago. The initial instance of literary inquisition dates back to Qin Dynasty (221-206 BC), the first feudal government in China, when Emperor Shihuang of Qin made the notorious order for The Burning of Books and Burying of Scholars (焚書坑儒 *Fen shu keng ru*, 213-212 BC) in order to gain supreme ideological control over the people.<sup>2</sup> The practice of literary inquisition became officially recognized and popularly utilized after the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127) with the case of Crow Terrace Poetry Trial.<sup>3</sup> Literary inquisition reached a climax in the dynasty of Qing, when Manchurian emperors Kangxi 康熙 (1654-1722), Yongzheng 雍正 (1678-1735) and Qianlong 乾隆 (1711-1799) employed the method to fight against their political rivals, especially the Han Chinese, and to gain ultimate control over their citizens.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Clark Grant, “The Great Firewall of China,” *Bloomberg.com*, last modified November 5, 2018. [https://www.bloomberg.com/quicktake/great-firewall-of-china?utm\\_source=url\\_link](https://www.bloomberg.com/quicktake/great-firewall-of-china?utm_source=url_link).

<sup>2</sup> “The Burning of the Books,” Qin Dynasty, accessed December 16, 2019, <https://qindynasty-ancienthistory.weebly.com/the-burning-of-the-books.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Hartman, Charles, “Poetry and Politics in 1079: The Crow Terrace Poetry Case of Su Shih,” *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews (CLEAR)*, no. 12 (1990): 16-17. <https://doi.org/10.2307/495222>.

<sup>4</sup> Sun, Jiahui. “China’s History of Literary Persecution,” *The World of Chinese*, last modified August 13, 2015. <https://www.theworldofchinese.com/2015/08/chinas-history-of-literary-persecution/>.

In medieval China, especially during the Tang Dynasty (618-907), freedom of speech brought the literati class momentous opportunities for creativity, fostering a free and welcoming literary environment in which authors produced an abundance of works, such as Tang Poetry. Tang Emperors were famous for their endurance amidst critique and their generous attitudes toward political dissidents. In the beginning of Tang Dynasty, Emperor Taizong of Tang 唐太宗 treated his cabinet ministers such as Wei Zheng 魏徵, the Chancellor of the cabinet, who critiqued the emperor's reign, with utmost respect.<sup>5</sup> A poet, Bai Juyi 白居易, dared to compose a long poem called *Song of Everlasting Regret* (長恨歌 Chang Hen Ge) to criticize Emperor Xuanzong of Tang 唐玄宗. His tragic romance with Concubine Yang Yuhuan 楊玉環 was the turning point for the Tang Dynasty from prosperity and wealth to decline.<sup>6</sup>

Unfortunately, this enjoyment of freedom of speech ceased when the Northern Song Dynasty began its reign over China. As technology advanced in Northern Song Dynasty, paper became more affordable and available. The forums of free media thus became more popular amongst the literati class.<sup>7</sup> Even though the Emperors of early Song Dynasty tried to remain objective and embrace critiques, such a great amount of dissident literatures eventually provoked the Emperors to take away such liberties from the Chinese people.

In the late eleventh century, China was under the reign of Emperor Shenzong 宋神宗 of the Song Dynasty. During the reign, Wang Anshi

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<sup>5</sup> “魏征 Wei Zheng (AD 580-643) Candid Official Earns Great Respect,” *Shanghai daily.com*, last modified October 27, 2011. <https://archive.shine.cn/sunday/now-and-then/魏征-Wei-Zheng-AD-580643-Candid-official-earns-great-respect/shdaily.shtml>.

<sup>6</sup> 李 兴濂, “唐朝的言论自由,” 国学闲话杂谈 *Guoxue Xianhua Zatan*, no. 12 (2008): 73–75.

<sup>7</sup> Jane Hill, “The Song Dynasty: Technology, Commerce, and Prosperity,” *UTC Wordmark*, <https://www.utc.edu/asia-program/modules/songdynasty.php>.

founded the New Policy Movement, which was largely supported by Shenzong because the emperor resented the factional conflicts amongst his cabinet members. Su Shi 蘇軾, the great poet, faced jeopardy in his political career because of an appreciative article he wrote to the Emperor for his promotion from governor of Xuzhou to governor of Huzhou.<sup>8</sup> When Su Shi “submitted his memorial of gratitude to the Emperor,” however, “some critics excerpted his expressions to make them seem slanderous.” (Hartman 18) In this article named 湖州謝上表 (Thankful Memorial to the Emperor— from Huzhou, Hu zhou xie shang biao), Su Shi wrote a sentence that was considered to be criticizing the New Policy Movement: “知其愚不適時，難以追陪新進；察其老不生事，或能牧養小民” (Jing, 51) which translates to “I know that I am too stupid to keep updated with the (political) situation, and I am too old to causing troubles, so you can send me (to Huzhou) to peacefully farm and graze.”<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, due to political rivalry, supporters of the New Policy such as He Chenzheng 何臣正 attempted to employ this article as a weapon against Su Shi by partially quoting and misinterpreting his words. Eventually He (何) “charged in an indictment to the throne that the writings of Su Shih (Su Shi) contained unrestrained censures of government policy” (Hartman 16). As a result, Emperor Shenzong supported the inquisition for the sake of purging factional fighting, prompting the collection and confiscation of many of Su Shi’s poems throughout the nation. The emperor’s reforms resulted in exile for Su Shi’s brother Su Zhe 蘇轍, the demotion of the conservative party’s leaders including Sima Guang 司馬光 and Huang Tingjian 黃庭堅, and a year of imprisonment of Su Shi himself, who was later exiled to

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<sup>8</sup> 景 新强, “Lun Beisong De Wenzhi Yu 論北宋的文字獄 (On Literary Inquisition of Northern Song Dynasty),” *Journal of Shaanxi Normal University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)* 36, no. 2 (March 2007): 40.

<sup>9</sup> 景 新强. “Lun Beisong De Wenzhi Yu 論北宋的文字獄 (On Literary Inquisition of Northern Song Dynasty).” *Journal of Shaanxi Normal University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)* 36, no. 2 (March 2007): 51.

Huangzhou, a faraway rural town.<sup>10</sup> Known as the Crow Terrace Poetry Case, Su Shi's trial marks the first official case and the beginning of the formation period of the Literary Inquisition, with the purging of political dissidents in the favor of the emperor. Thus, the thousand-year long Literary Inquisition officially began.<sup>11</sup>

The Qing Dynasty, which reigned from 1636 to 1911, was notorious for its intensive and unhumanitarian application of literary inquisition. Founded by Manchurians, a northern minority race originated from northeastern China, the Emperors of Qing dynasty pushed the Han-culture movement that forced aristocrats of Qing Dynasty to learn and adapt to the Han culture in order to assimilate the different races and gain trust over the Han Chinese to ensure their reign. The worst fear for the Emperors of Qing was that the Han people would not regard them as the rightful ruling regime because the Han Chinese historically considered racial minorities, including the Manchurians, as "barbarians." The Emperors of Qing Dynasty, especially Emperor Qian Long 乾隆皇帝 (1711-1799), consequently became extremely sensitive toward literal works which challenged the Qing's reign. Qian Long expelled his political rivals throughout the nation, specifically those from the Han race, on the grounds of literary inquisition and even established prisons specifically for literary criminals. In the book of *The Literary Inquisition of Ch'ien Lung*, author Luther Carrington Goodrich lists several major standards that Emperor Qian Long implemented to gauge the necessity for the censorship of a literary work: "Was it anti-dynastic or rebellious? [...] Did it insult previous dynasties which were, in a sense, ancestral to the Ch'ing (Qing)? [...] Did it give a biased, or in Manchu eyes,

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<sup>10</sup> Charles Hartman, "Poetry and Politics in 1079: The Crow Terrace Poetry Case of Su Shih," *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews (CLEAR)*12 (1990): 22. <https://doi.org/10.2307/495222>.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.16-22.

unfavorable account of any incident or series of events in the Chinese-Manchu period of conflict of the seventeenth century?”<sup>12</sup>

The most famous case during Emperor Qian Long's career was “The Case of Hu Chung-Tsao 胡中藻案” (Hu Zhongzao An). Hu Zhongzao was a student of O-erh-t'ai (Ortai) 鄂爾泰, a highly-ranked Manchurian official during the reign of Emperor Yong Zheng 雍正, the father of Qian Long. Before the case, Hu was a respected scholar evaluated by Emperor Yong Zheng, and he was even appointed as the counselor of the Governor of Guangxi Province. However, according to Goodrich, “There was much rivalry between this great Manchu official (Ortai) and the even more important Chinese Chang T'ing-yu 張廷玉 (Zhang Tingyu), which continued between the students of each after the death of the former in 1745. All of this the” current emperor Qian Long “very deeply deplored” (Goodrich 94). Hu banded together with Ortai's faction, causing resentment on the part of the emperor. Qian Long objected to participation in factions of cabinet members and other government officials because any conflict among factions was direct threat to the throne. In 1755, Qian Long demanded a search for all the literary materials written by Hu, scanning them for words considered “rebellious”. In a book entitled *Chien Mo Sheng Shih Ch'ao* 堅磨生詩鈔 (Jian mo sheng shi chao), translated as *Poetries of Jianmosheng* (Hu's style name) Hu writes, “My emotions ponder on the corrupt and pure [or, soiling the pure]. 一把心腸論濁清” (Goodrich 94)<sup>13</sup> In Chinese, the character of pure 清 and the character of “Qing 清” Dynasty is the same. Emperor Qianlong hence accused him of slandering the the Qing Dynasty because Hu put the word corruption 濁 before Qing 清, even though Hu did not intend to employ this meaning of the Chinese

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<sup>12</sup> Luther Carrington Goodrich, *The Literary Inquisition of Chien-Lung* (New York: Paragon Book Reprint, 1966), 44-52.

<sup>13</sup> Luther Carrington Goodrich, *The Literary Inquisition of Chien-Lung* (New York: Paragon Book Reprint, 1966), 94.

character. As a result, Qian Long had Hu beheaded along with other members of his family. Even the spirit tablet—a tablet put in a family house that the Chinese believe to represent the spirit of the diseased human being— of Hu’s former teacher Ortai was removed out of his ancestral temple. Although Hu actually supported the Manchurian faction led by his former teacher Ortai, Emperor Qian Long sentenced Hu to death on the grounds of fabricated lines based on Qian Long’s inquisition standards because he felt offended by the factional conflicts amongst both political factions. After Hu’s death, Emperor Qian Long achieved a successful political career with a peaceful and prosperous reign. Nonetheless, the Literary Inquisition in Qing Dynasty marked a prevailing period of the darkest and most inhumane events of premodern Chinese history.

Chinese censorship is thus not exclusive to the modern period; its predecessor, literary inquisition, had existed for over a thousand years before the enactment of modern censorship. The case of the Crow Terrace Poetry Trial in Northern Song Dynasty marked the beginning of literary inquisition, and the Hu Zhongzao Case represents its continuity during Qing Dynasty. The primary reasons for the method were the Chinese emperors’ desires to preserve their reign, fight against political dissidents, and eliminate conflicts among cabinet members. Such literary censorship and its punishment certainly reveal the darkest and most inhumane side of Chinese culture. Yet, the censorship served as a critical means of preserving stability of political regimes throughout premodern Chinese history. Literary inquisition and censorship allowed for political and cultural dominance throughout multiple dynasties as emperors maintained their images and reputations, so that while literature and the arts dwindled, the power of the Chinese emperors flourished.

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