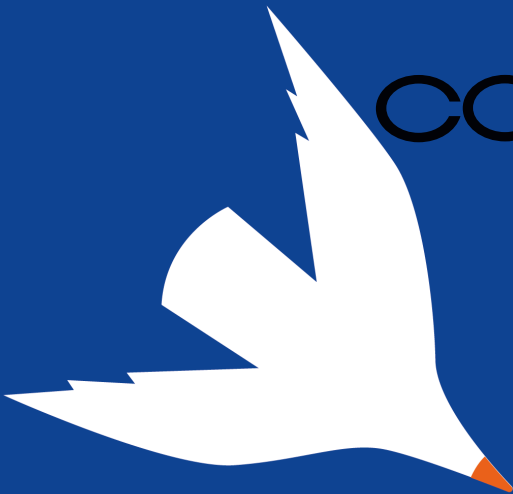


CONNECTING THE DOTS

Artist Protection &
Artistic Freedom in Asia



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This report summarizes the findings of a closed virtual workshop convened in November 2021 by PEN America's Artists at Risk Connection (ARC), Mekong Cultural Hub (MCH), and Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA). With participants from across South Asia, Southeast Asia, East Asia, and Central Asia, the workshop sought exploring pressing issues surrounding artistic freedom in Asia.

[The Artists at Risk Connection](#), a project of PEN America, safeguards the right to artistic freedom of expression around the world and works to ensure that artists of all disciplines everywhere can live and work without fear. With a global network of 800 organizations providing crucial resources for artists and cultural practitioners at risk, ARC plays a critical role in liaising threatened artists with the organizations that support them. We raise awareness of threats to artistic freedom, spotlight the work of persecuted artists, and mobilize arts and cultural institutions to play a more prominent role in assisting their field's most vulnerable members. Since its inception, ARC has supported more than 500 artists from over 63 countries, referring them to partner organizations that offer fellowships and residencies, emergency funding, legal assistance, and advocacy, among other forms of aid. For more information, go to artistsatriskconnection.org.

Mekong Cultural Hub empowers diverse artists and cultural leaders to realize their visions for a sustainable and inclusive Mekong region. MCH connects people who work at the intersection of arts and society throughout Asia, with a special focus on Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam, to create opportunities for professional exchange, co-creation, and collaboration. For more information, go to mekongculturalhub.org.

The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) is the largest membership-based human rights and development organization in Asia, with a network of 85 member organizations in 23 countries across the continent. FORUM-ASIA works to promote and protect human rights for all, including the right to development, through collaboration and cooperation among human rights organizations and defenders in Asia and beyond. For more information, go to forum-asia.org.



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CONNECTING THE DOTS

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CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	06
INTRODUCTION	10
METHODOLOGY	14
Organizing the Workshop	14
Participants, Presenters, and Facilitators	14
Security and Confidentiality	15
UNDERSTANDING ARTISTIC FREEDOM IN ASIA: A BALANCE OF PERSPECTIVES	18
TRACING THE TRAJECTORIES OF REPRESSION: WHAT CENSORSHIP LOOKS LIKE IN DIFFERENT COUNTRIES	24
ART, ACTIVISM, AND TECHNOLOGY: THE CHALLENGES OF A DIGITAL WORLD	30
COGS IN THE SYSTEM: DEMYSTIFYING LEGAL AND HUMAN RIGHTS AID MECHANISMS	36
KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	40
GLOSSARY	42



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In December 2021, PEN America's [Artists at Risk Connection](#) (ARC), [Mekong Cultural Hub](#) (MCH), and [Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development](#) (FORUM-ASIA) held a closed virtual workshop to explore creative freedom and discuss mechanisms to protect artists and their expression. The workshop was designed as a follow-up to a previous closed workshop, convened by ARC, MCH, and FORUM-ASIA in December 2020, that addressed the startling number of threats to artistic freedom in Asia. The findings from that workshop were published in [Arresting Art: Repression, Censorship, and Artistic Freedom in Asia](#), which investigated and analyzed the increasingly hostile climate for artists across South, Southeast, and East Asia.¹ The 2021 workshop expanded the represented regions to include Central Asia. The organizers felt that including this region was crucial in light of the current humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan that has emerged since the withdrawal of U.S. military forces in August 2021 and the subsequent takeover by the Taliban. This takeover has gravely endangered Afghan artists, who face persecution for no other reason than that they are artists. Based on discussions from the 2021 workshop as well as our own observations drawn from frequent communication with Asian artists and organizations, it is clear that challenges to artistic freedom have continued to escalate in the past year, with a notable rise in legislation that impinges on digital security and stifles communications by curbing “fake news.” Such legislation is increasingly being used to restrict free expression, free assembly, and any criticism of the ruling party or government—which has a direct and devastating impact on the rights and creative practice of artists across Asia.

This report summarizes the core ideas and key takeaways of the 2021 workshop. Discussions focused primarily on the following subjects:

- The intrinsic value of the arts at a time of sociopolitical and economic transition in Asia.
- The forces of censorship in Asia, with a view to identifying and exploring the impact of various overt and covert measures on artists and their ability to express themselves freely.
- The role of artist-enabled networks in protecting artists and providing solidarity, with particular emphasis on the role of social media as well as an examination of alternative models and approaches.

Key findings include:

- As threats to artistic freedom in Asia intensify, it is critical for artists to develop self-care protocols and build strong relationships with allies—approaches that will help artists navigate the mental and emotional toll of risk and gain access to support mechanisms.
- There are divergent understandings of what artistic freedom is and how Asian artists and cultural practitioners experience it, rooted in cultural and political differences among countries. It is important to develop a shared definition of artistic freedom, to articulate common values, to account for varied experiences, and to encourage artists to become more involved in policy-based roles and legislation that shape the ways artistic freedom is defined and protected.
- Relocation mechanisms too often rely on moving artists to another part of the world rather than elsewhere in Asia. Because regional relocation is less expensive, often poses fewer logistical hurdles, and allows artists to remain in a culturally familiar environment, it should be prioritized when artists seek to relocate.

The workshop participants identified the following recommendations:

- Develop and strengthen artist-enabled networks in a manner that is sensitive to the risk and trauma they experience.
- Offer virtual mentoring sessions that address topics like financial security, digital safety, and emotional resilience.
- Create a digital toolkit for artists in remote locations, empowering them to expand their communities and use digital resources to further their reach.
- Deploy digital resources in a more concerted effort to track, map, and monitor cases of censorship.
- Rethink and reframe the definition of “artist-activist,” especially at human rights organizations, to smash stereotypes of how artists are viewed and perceived.

NOTES

¹ Because of heightened security concerns related to surveillance and other digital restrictions, none of the participants were from mainland China, and as a result this report mostly excludes this country (with the exception of Hong Kong). China is, however, one of the world's worst perpetrators of censorship and violations of free expression. For example, according to PEN America's “Freedom to Write Index 2021,” China is the worst jailer of writers of any country, with the total number increasing to 85, from 81 the previous year. In many respects, the problems faced by artists in China mirror those outlined in this report: Artists who identify as minorities like Uyghur and Hui face heightened risks, online threats are rising, artists are regularly prosecuted under national security laws, and dangers are generally increasing as a result of the targeting of writers and online commentators who speak out about the government's response to COVID-19. Issues unique to China that fall outside the scope of this report include, but are not limited to, the Chinese Communist Party's authoritarian strictures, the mass detention of Muslim minorities, sovereignty conflicts for semiautonomous regions like Tibet and Xinjiang, rigorous and systematic online censorship, and state regulation of information.



INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

In December 2021, PEN America's Artists at Risk Connection, Mekong Cultural Hub, and Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development held a closed virtual workshop to explore creative freedom and discuss mechanisms to protect artists and their expression. The workshop was designed as a follow-up to a previous closed workshop, in December 2020, that addressed the startling number of threats to artistic freedom in Asia. The findings from that workshop were published in *Arresting Art: Repression, Censorship, and Artistic Freedom in Asia*, which revealed the increasingly hostile climate for artists across South, Southeast, and East Asia.

This report summarizes the core ideas and key takeaways of the 2021 workshop. Based on discussions from that workshop as well as our own observations drawn from frequent communication with Asian artists and organizations, it is clear that challenges to artistic freedom have continued to escalate in the past year, with a notable rise in legislation that impinges on digital security and stifles communications by curbing “fake news.” Such legislation is increasingly being used to restrict free expression, free assembly, and any criticism of the ruling party or government—which has a direct and devastating impact on the rights and creative practice of artists.

In the interest of security, we have kept the identities of attendees and some details confidential, but we have provided examples and context to accurately portray the participants' experiences and suggestions.

According to PEN America's Freedom to Write Index 2021, at least 277 writers were arrested globally, with the most significant increase in incarcerations recorded in Myanmar, following the deliberate targeting of writers and the larger creative community in the aftermath of a military coup.² “The 2021 State of Artistic Freedom Report,” published by Freemuse, states that in 2020 nearly 322 artists were arbitrarily detained, prosecuted, or sentenced to prison terms, primarily for political reasons.³ Those arrested were largely targeted for expression that was deemed critical of state authorities, such as insulting officials and national symbols, organizing and participating in anti-government protests, and criticizing government responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Freemuse reported that 21 percent of recorded artist arrests occurred in the Asia-Pacific region.

Such staggering numbers underscore the anxieties and experiences voiced by the 2020 participants and shared in *Arresting Art*. Many 2021 participants echoed their concerns, which were exacerbated by the hardships of a second year of the pandemic, triggering the introduction of measures that outright discouraged artists

from assembling in public or caused the closure of spaces on grounds of financial distress or noncompliance with COVID-19 protocols. Most notably, several Asian governments launched targeted attacks on creative professionals and spaces under the guise that their actions harmed national security or sovereignty. This trend persisted in various parts of Asia, exemplified by the passage of laws such as Bangladesh's Digital Security Act,⁴ Hong Kong's National Security Law,⁵ and Malaysia's Communication and Multimedia Act.⁶

Amid growing fears of censorship and persecution, many artists, creative professionals, and organizations found themselves questioning their purpose during these critical times—a sentiment expressed repeatedly during the 2021 discussions.

“It's not that the arts are not useful—it's just that they're not accommodated.”

— Pakistani workshop participant, graphic artist, educator, and activist

NOTES

² Karin Deutsch Karlekar and Veronica Tien, “Freedom to Write Index 2021,” PEN America, April 13, 2022, pen.org/report/freedom-to-write-index-2021

³ Freemuse, “The State of Artistic Freedom 2021,” Freemuse, February 2021, freemuse.org/media/ck5fvaze/the-state-of-artistic-freedom-2021.pdf

⁴ “The Bangladesh (46): Digital Security Act, 2018,” October 8, 2018, ilo.org/dyn/natlex/natlex4.detail?p_lang=en&p_isn=110029&p_count=46&p_classification=01

⁵ The Law of the People's Republic of China on Safeguarding National Security in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, June 30, 2020, [https://www.elegislation.gov.hk/fwddoc/hk/a406/eng_translation_\(a406\)_en.pdf](https://www.elegislation.gov.hk/fwddoc/hk/a406/eng_translation_(a406)_en.pdf)

⁶ “Communications and Multimedia Act 1998,” March 1, 2002, <https://www.mcmc.gov.my/en/legal/acts>



METHODOLOGY

METHODOLOGY

Organizing the Workshop

In light of the significance of the topics under discussion and the security and accessibility concerns of the participants, the workshop was conducted virtually, as an intensive four-day online experience. The 2021 workshop both followed up on the status of the previous year's findings and identified additional and emerging challenges in Asia.

The workshop was divided into three parts:

- Closed-door virtual exchanges on three primary themes relating to artistic expression in Asia.
- Open spaces for participants to present their artistic projects.
- Training sessions, open to both participants in the above-mentioned virtual exchanges and contributors to the 2020 workshop.

The sessions brought together a diverse group of artists, academics, cultural workers, lawyers, and representatives of NGOs to discuss the state of art, activism, and human rights across South, Southeast, East, and Central Asia. Workshop organizers made conscious efforts to include representatives from Central Asia in response to the growing threats to artistic freedom there.

Prior to the workshop, the organizers shared a questionnaire with all participants, asking about their personal knowledge and experience of topics such as the status of artists and cultural workers in the community, issues of expression, and artist-enabled networks. The organizers drew on these insightful responses to devise the workshop sessions, topics, and structure, including the themes of three main sessions:

- The utility and value of the arts in contemporary Asian societies.
- Censorship and its various forms.
- The role of technology in artistic presentations and networks.

Participants, Presenters, and Facilitators

Each thematic session was led by a dedicated presenter, and breakout sessions were guided by facilitators. The presenters and facilitators are practitioners and experts with diverse regional and international experience in issues related to artistic freedom, violations of free speech and expression, human rights advocacy, cultural policy, law, and regional cooperation.

All participants attended all sessions over four days. The workshop also created a “spotlight” space where participants shared their creative projects and held focused, crowdsourced discussions.

A total of 27 stakeholders (19 participants, 3 presenters, and 5 facilitators) from 19 countries in South, Southeast, East, and Central Asia took part in the workshop. Among the 27 participants were visual artists, musicians, writers, curators, civil society organizers, activists, human rights defenders, representatives of human rights organizations, lawyers, cultural managers, and digital security experts.

Security and Confidentiality

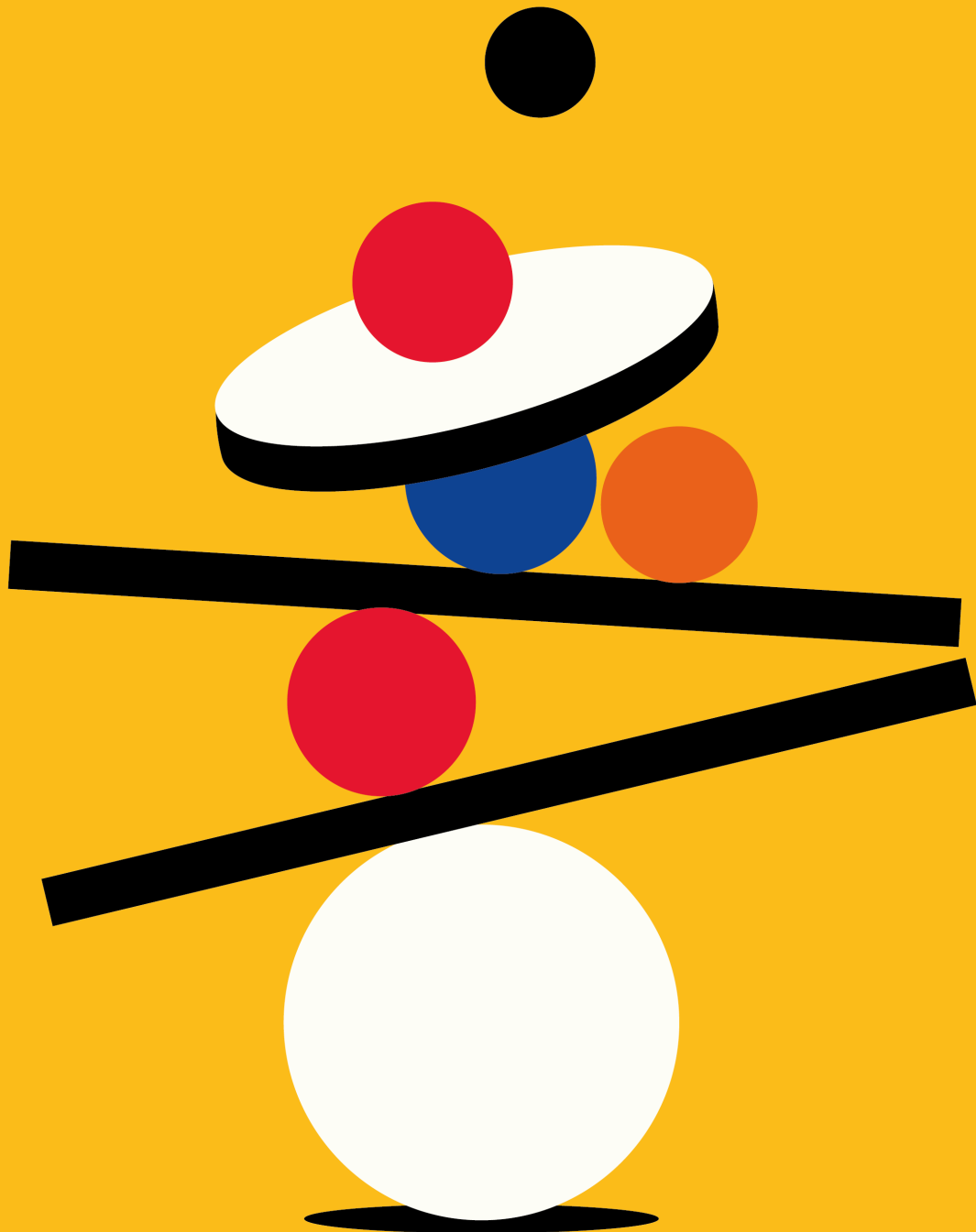
As with the 2020 workshop, a closed workshop format was adopted to ensure a safe, supportive, respectful, and open exchange among all participants. No public calls for participation were issued—participants were invited on the basis of their experience and expertise. All were required to observe a set of house rules, the primary rule being to maintain confidentiality.

Given the utmost importance of protecting the safety and confidentiality of participants and discussions, the workshop was conducted on a secure platform, using only secure networks for the exchange of program and participant information.

All participants were requested to refrain from discussing the workshop in the public domain and to observe the Chatham House Rule: “When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed.”

In the interest of upholding our core values of security, trust, and confidentiality, we have agreed that the above-mentioned rule also applies to this report, wherein we refrain from sharing names of people and organizations or any specific identifying features.

All participants signed a pledge to abide by the above terms and obligations, to keep Any intellectual property shared during the workshop strictly confidential, and not to reproduce it in any manner or form without explicit prior permission. Recordings and survey responses were also understood as being kept confidential and protected under the same pledge.



UNDERSTANDING
ARTISTIC FREEDOM
IN ASIA: A BALANCE
OF PERSPECTIVES

UNDERSTANDING ARTISTIC FREEDOM IN ASIA: A BALANCE OF PERSPECTIVES

“In order for democracy to function, everyone has to have a voice, [in] whatever form that voice takes, whether that is the form of a poem, a song, or a protest song, or a film, or a picture.”

—Deeyah Khan, UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador for artistic freedom and creativity

UNESCO defines artistic freedom as the freedom to imagine, create, and distribute diverse cultural expressions free of governmental censorship, political interference, or the pressures of non-state actors. It includes the right of all citizens to have access to these works and is essential for the well-being of societies.⁷ Despite the existence of institutional definitions such as UNESCO's, workshop discussions revealed the lack of a cohesive definition of artistic freedom among participants, attributing this divergence to their differing political and social contexts. The unique experiences of each participant informed their perspective on what artistic freedom meant to them both personally and in the context of their country.

Devising a clear definition is critical for mapping the threats and challenges to artists across Asia. As a Philippines-based cultural researcher and session facilitator asserted, to understand the dynamics of censorship and creative freedom in such a vast area, it is first necessary to map the specifics of how different regions, countries, and communities experience these issues.

Lack of specificity

Participants in both the 2020 and 2021 workshops underscored the need to acknowledge emerging differences among the experiences of artists across Asia. While the participants acknowledged many similarities, they also reported distinct challenges, threats, and potential solutions—hinting at a state of artistic freedom that is fragmented and localized.

A Singapore-based workshop presenter, cultural practitioner, and creative researcher emphasized the need to arrive at an Asia-wide definition of artistic freedom that also gives voice to individual artists' concerns. Attempts to create an inclusive and universal definition risk losing out on the more nuanced and unique experiences of artists and cultural rights defenders in Asia.

These discrepancies over specificity point to the need for a deeper look at the varied experiences of artist-activists. The workshop discussions revealed that many artists at risk speak not from just one context but from two: the home that they have fled and the place where they now live in exile. Two exiled workshop participants—a Uyghur musician and a Vietnamese filmmaker—noted that they continue to advocate for artistic rights in the homelands they no longer live in.

The discussions also showed that artists and cultural practitioners increasingly participate in shaping the changing landscape of their countries' and communities' artistic freedom and human rights. They are no longer bystanders who passively witness events but are actively engaged in the sociopolitical twists and turns. In Myanmar, for example, artists were quick to mobilize and lend support to protests against the February 2021 coup—efforts that ultimately became known as the Spring Revolution.⁸

Another takeaway from the conversations was that artists are being censored and threatened faster than existing frameworks can monitor. There is a widely held belief that a significant number of cases go unreported, owing to the stealthy nature of the threats against artists, many of which fall between the cracks of existing monitoring

NOTES

⁷ UNESCO, Director-General, 2017-(A. Azoulay), “Reshaping Cultural Policies: Advancing Creativity for Development,” UNESCO, 2017, unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000260592

⁸ Manojna Yeluri, “The Spring Revolution and the Power of Creative Dissent in Myanmar,” Artists at Risk Connection, March 28, 2022, artistsatriskconnection.org/story/the-spring-revolution-and-the-power-of-creative-dissent-in-myanmar

criteria and systems. In the workshop discussions, these elusive unreported threats were referred to as “soft blocks”—measures administered by state and non-state authorities that discourage artists from continuing their activism by introducing obstacles in their daily lives. Soft blocks include travel bans (cited by participants in Malaysia, Thailand, and Pakistan), the abrupt removal of funding (cited by participants in Singapore, Hong Kong, and India), and public disapproval facilitated by the comments of influential media and celebrities (cited by participants in Pakistan, Malaysia, India, and Indonesia). Such curbs are rarely documented as instances of censorship. The lack of documentation, in turn, leads to a lack of data that could help identify trends of harassment.

“We are missing out on the details of each layer or stage of repression as it happens. We are missing out on capturing how swiftly things are changing for many of us in our contexts, whether it’s in the state of our un-freedom in general or in terms of artistic repression in particular.”

— *Philippines-based session facilitator, cultural researcher, and activist*

Arguably, it is the lack of specificity that makes it difficult to capture the experiences of artistic freedom in Asia in a manner that is both cohesive and easier to monitor.

Boxed in: being an artist and an activist

The need to define artistic freedom hinges on an understanding of the purpose of art—a theme that came up frequently during the workshop. In their breakout sessions, participants expressed their opinions on the value and utility of the arts in contemporary society.

“Politics is why I became an artist.”

— *Myanmar-based participant, visual and multimedia artist, and activist*

Arriving at a definition of artistic freedom that is both universal and sensitive to specific experiences is challenging enough. This process is further complicated by the issue of how to characterize the role of an artist. Many participants spoke about

identity dynamics and a pervasive tendency toward reductive either-or labeling when differentiating between artists and activists. What if an artist’s right to free expression is inextricably connected to the content of their work? What if it hinges on their regional context? Or on communicating their private transformations and experiences? When the personal is political, personal reflections can hold a mirror to the politics that govern an individual and the society they are witness to. Herein lies the quandary of identifying artists as activists: To what extent should their motivations and intent determine their identity?

Workshop discussions revealed that many artists in Asia find that human rights groups tend to treat them as solely artists or creative practitioners rather than as human rights defenders, due to the lack of an expansive understanding of protest art, particularly if it is subtle. Conversely, many said that art groups label them as activists rather than artists. As a result, artists often fall between the cracks, finding no support from either the human rights world or the art world. Participants from India, Kazakhstan, and Myanmar found this dichotomy particularly frustrating and called for a less binary approach toward understanding the relationship between art and activism.

This pressure to label themselves as either-or pushed some artists and practitioners into what one participant termed “the singular mode of ‘activist-y’ art,” which they felt inhibited their freedom to produce non-activist art. As a Taiwan-based workshop participant and visual artist said, being from Taiwan meant there was an unspoken but heavy expectation that she continually engage in anti-China perspectives in her art, though she was also interested in exploring other issues, like migrant labor. She and other participants, including a Philippines-based artist, curator, and activist, chafed at finding themselves in echo chambers that thrust a singular identity upon them.



TRACING THE
TRAJECTORIES OF
REPRESSION:
WHAT CENSORSHIP
LOOKS LIKE IN
DIFFERENT
COUNTRIES

TRACING THE TRAJECTORIES OF REPRESSION: WHAT CENSORSHIP LOOKS LIKE IN DIFFERENT COUNTRIES

“No artist or cultural worker is unclear about where the threats to her freedom come from—there is always a sense of the source or origins of our fear.”

—Philippines-based session facilitator, cultural researcher, and activist

During the workshop, participants asserted that censorship, restrictions, repression, and other forms of overt and covert pressure on artists have intensified in the past year. They were quick to enumerate the many forms of harassment from state actors, including the withholding of permission for art events and exhibitions, multiple restrictions on economic activities, and a profusion of legal cases being foisted on artists, cartoonists, and filmmakers. In both 2020 and 2021, participants discussed the term “climate of fear,” which refers to the way that authorities incite the public to do their dirty work, stoking fear or calls for censorship among the populace to achieve political or sociocultural goals. State actors increasingly deem artists who are not explicitly pro-government to be anti-state or even a danger to the state. A Hong Kong-based workshop participant and media studies educator researching

the impact of political cartoons in Southeast and East Asia said that the state had moved from stealth censorship to a more performative mode, manufacturing popular indignation over certain forms of artistic expression by tarring them as offensive and thus worthy of policing.

At the same time, civil society organizations, human rights groups, non-governmental art organizations, and advocacy groups have been losing ground in their fight to counter repression and censorship, their best efforts failing to keep pace with the multiplicity, evolution, and intensification of threats to artists.

Legislative targeting

Many artists and cultural practitioners pointed to the lack of a methodology to comprehensively identify and monitor the various threats, causes, and triggers of censorship. While all participants agreed on the oppressive power of both state and non-state actors, many expressed additional concerns about an escalation of attacks by local authorities on those who shared artwork that expressed political dissent. A Malaysian political graphic artist and an Indian political cartoonist noted that in the past year alone, local police and judicial officials had issued warrants for their arrest, initiated inquiries into their work, and threatened criminal prosecution and detention—jeopardizing their livelihoods, security, social media presence, and well-being.

“Art just for art has run out of usefulness. I was transformed through my art.”

—Kazakhstan-based workshop participant, curator, and visual artist

A number of Asian countries have introduced anti-free expression laws and legislative instruments. From Bangladesh’s Digital Security Act,⁹ Hong Kong’s National Security Law,¹⁰ and Malaysia’s Communication and Multimedia Act¹¹

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⁹ Bangladesh (46): Digital Security Act, 2018, October 8, 2018, ilo.org/dyn/natlex/natlex4.detail?p_lang=en&p_isn=110029&p_count=46&p_classification=01

¹⁰ The Law of the People’s Republic of China on Safeguarding National Security in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, June 30, 2020, [www.elegislation.gov.hk/fwddoc/hk/a406/eng_translation_\(a406\)_en.pdf](https://www.elegislation.gov.hk/fwddoc/hk/a406/eng_translation_(a406)_en.pdf)

¹¹ Communications and Multimedia Act 1998, March 1, 2002, <https://www.mcmc.gov.my/en/legal/acts>

to similar measures in India, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Thailand, workshop participants agreed that laws designed to curtail free expression were increasingly being used to silence any form of dissent. Bangladeshi lawyers and free expression advocates who participated in the workshop expressed alarm at this flood of draconian legislation and the lack of fair trials, warning of their potential to significantly erode the lives and livelihoods of artists advocating for social justice.

The deliberate attacks triggered by these laws, whether physical, digital, or social, have devastated artists and their loved ones. Workshop participants, many of them in exile, shared disturbing accounts of community ostracism and threats of serious violence from pro-government groups in their home countries and recounted their experiences of fleeing for their safety. Fearing such shunning and harassment or facing the prospect of legal persecution, many artists self-censor. Workshop participants, especially those from Pakistan, India, Singapore, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, explained that at times they feel pressured to step away from engaging certain subjects and issues to protect themselves and their work. They reported that public figures and celebrities sometimes do the government's bidding, expressing disapproval of certain forms of creative expression, which then turns the general public against an artist or precipitates the withdrawal of institutional and community support. Film actors in India, for instance, known for their societal stature and influence on audiences, have been known to express pro-government views to sway public opinion.

Nearly all participants agreed that there is a pervasive lack of clarity on the extent of such repression and on remedies available to Asian artists at risk.

“No society has just one culture. There is always a dominant culture of those with the power to punish deviations but also many subaltern cultures, such as of women, youth, and minority groups and marginalized people. Just because it is not the majority does not make it any less valuable or real.”

—Pakistan-based session presenter, activist, cultural practitioner, and founder of a human rights organization

Censorship by the market

Market censorship—or restricting the marketability of a given cultural commodity—has also become prevalent in recent years. Several participants noted that in their country, public funding for noncommercial art is almost completely nonexistent or highly selective, while alternative distribution possibilities are often minimal. It is particularly concerning when governments give for-profit advertising and marketing

companies high priority for the use of public spaces while restricting artistic expression. In April 2021 in Delhi, for example, two murals by a street art collective were covered by artworks that were part of a Budweiser campaign¹².

Whether through legislative restrictions or economic support, most participants reported that only certain art forms or creative narratives are promoted, while other genres, artworks, and artists are ignored. Participants observed that officials typically approve art by those who do not offer significant sociopolitical critiques. Dwindling or restricted state support for dissenting art has made artists more dependent on the commercial market and the creative economy. At the same time, though, the marketplace has become more risk averse and less willing to support, purchase, or invest in art created by dissenters. An India-based workshop participant and political cartoonist said that after they created work that criticized the government's recent actions, their publisher canceled their contract and stopped releasing their weekly comic strip despite its growing popularity. The artist has since begun to explore alternative platforms, both monetary (Patreon) and non-monetary (Instagram), but for less money and a smaller audience.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the fallout from this economic censorship. Participants from Pakistan, India, Singapore, Laos, Malaysia and Indonesia noted that exhibition and performance spaces have curtailed events or shut down entirely. Funders and donors have become increasingly wary when determining whom to support, as such decisions can threaten their own survival. For artists, the pandemic-induced dearth of money and exhibition opportunities, the skewing of the playing field toward pro-state art, and the states' more censoring, intolerant stances have made the pursuit of art, especially as a primary vocation, a risky proposition.

NOTES

¹² Tanishka DLyima, “Budweiser vs St+art India row urges reconsideration of vital aspects of street art, including its ownership and erasure,” Firstpost, April 13, 2021, [firstpost.com/art-and-culture/budweiser-vs-start-india-row-urges-reconsideration-of-vital-aspects-of-street-art-including-its-ownership-and-erasure-9523481.html](https://www.firstpost.com/art-and-culture/budweiser-vs-start-india-row-urges-reconsideration-of-vital-aspects-of-street-art-including-its-ownership-and-erasure-9523481.html)



ART, ACTIVISM, AND
TECHNOLOGY:
THE CHALLENGES OF
A DIGITAL WORLD

ART, ACTIVISM, AND TECHNOLOGY: THE CHALLENGES OF A DIGITAL WORLD

The digital divide

Many workshop participants said that they frequently use technology, particularly social media platforms, to practice their art. But they reported growing anxieties in navigating digital spaces as state surveillance expands. Participants from India, Hong Kong, Singapore, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Myanmar, and the Philippines agreed that more monitoring, combined with ambiguous digital and national security laws, has resulted in several unlawful arrests. Among the most prominent was the case of Filipino filmmaker Bambi Beltran, who in 2020 was arrested for spreading “fake news” in a Facebook post that criticized the government’s management of the pandemic.¹³ The participants also suggested that social media platforms were often complicit in acts of censorship and repression.

Despite the risks of surveillance and monitoring, for many artists the digital realm has provided a safe space to carry out protests and advocacy work, which has been particularly important at a time when public assembly has been forbidden on grounds of either security or COVID-19 precautions. Workshop participants from Pakistan, the Philippines, and Malaysia pointed out that many people in their countries have taken to the internet for online protests of their governments’ actions. Even in Myanmar, artists have begun turning to social media to anonymously promote pro-democracy campaigns, turning the Spring Revolution into a more expansive and international movement. Several artists in Myanmar have joined the Milk Tea Alliance,¹⁴ an anonymous art movement that serves as a platform to consolidate and freely share artwork upholding democratic movements in Southeast and East Asia, especially in Hong Kong, Thailand, Myanmar, and Taiwan.

But workshop discussions revealed that there is considerable inequality when it comes to the use of and belief in technology across Asia. While employing technology to create art and forge connections outside existing networks is invaluable, its appeal and possibilities are accessible only to a select group of artists and cultural workers who have the resources, time, know-how, and energy to build a network outside their existing ones. This digital divide unfortunately makes technology more of a privilege than a right.

Discussions also demonstrated that many participants lacked awareness of digital security measures like virtual private networks (VPNs). Some were unable to access such protections and best practices due to their political and socioeconomic circumstances—a problem that the organizers sought to remedy by conducting training sessions on general safety, digital security, and digital activism for all workshop participants.

The deepening digital divide accentuates a deepening socioeconomic divide. Participants indicated that the rapid urbanization and digitalization of certain Asian economies and societies have proved stressful for smaller artist communities trying to keep up. With the latest methods and approaches often accessed through social media and the internet, artists in remote areas find it more challenging than those in cities to adopt resources dealing with the digitalization of artistic practice, understanding artists’ rights, and online networking forums.

Alternative communities and networks

Technology and the internet can be double-edged swords—facilitating connections while robbing individuals of identity and information; linking distant communities while creating vastly disparate experiences of technology and internet-based communications. The Uyghurs and many Vietnamese people associate digital technologies and the internet with surveillance.¹⁵ In countries like India, the

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¹³ Ryan Macasero, “Taken After Midnight, Cuffed to a Chair: The Arrest of Cebuana Artist Bambi Beltran,” Rappler, May 22, 2020, <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/261643-taken-midnight-cuffed-chair-cebuana-artist-bambi-beltran/>

¹⁴ Jasmine Chia and Scott Singer, “How the Milk Tea Alliance Is Remaking Myanmar,” The Diplomat, July 23, 2021, thediplomat.com/2021/07/how-the-milk-tea-alliance-is-remaking-myanmar

¹⁵ Johana Bhuiyan, “‘There’s Cameras Everywhere’: Testimonies Detail Far-Reaching Surveillance of Uyghurs in China,” The Guardian, September 30, 2021, theguardian.com/world/2021/sep/30/uyghur-tribunal-testimony-surveillance-china
Justin Sherman, “Vietnam’s Internet Control: Following in China’s Footsteps?,” The Diplomat, December 11, 2019, thediplomat.com/2019/12/vietnams-internet-control-following-in-chinas-footsteps

government has deployed internet shutdowns during mass demonstrations to minimize visibility.¹⁶ The military in Myanmar¹⁷ and the Taliban in Afghanistan¹⁸ have likewise sought to take over the internet in their respective countries to crush dissent by introducing various restrictions, including prolonged internet and phone network shutdowns, and by adopting surveillance measures that monitor internet protocol (IP) addresses.

Recognizing that technology is not a panacea, a South Korean workshop presenter, artist, activist, and educator proposed a wholesale reimagining of the way Asian artists use digital tools—a new way of viewing internet-based communication, networking, creativity, and activism that prioritizes the individual over the platform, marketplace, or state. There is an urgent need to develop new technologies and build alternative networks and communities that connect people both online and offline. Participants from Singapore and Indonesia discussed incorporating low-tech ideas like nongkrong (hanging around) and jalan-jalan (strolling)—Indonesian terms that speak to age-old traditions of organic gatherings that encourage open conversation and provide the opportunity to build community in a way that is both easeful and personal, without the heavy-handedness of big tech.

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¹⁶ Subir Sinha, “India Farmers’ Protests: Internet Shutdown Highlights Modi’s Record of Stifling Digital Dissent,” *The Conversation*, February 1, 2021, theconversation.com/india-farmers-protests-internet-shutdown-highlights-modis-record-of-stifling-digital-dissent-154287

¹⁷ Rebecca Ratcliffe, “Myanmar Coup: Military Expands Internet Shutdown,” *The Guardian*, April 2, 2021, theguardian.com/world/2021/apr/02/myanmar-coup-military-expands-internet-shutdown

¹⁸ Chris Stokel-Walker, “The Battle for Control of Afghanistan’s Internet,” *Wired*, July 9, 2021, [wired.co.uk/article/afghanistan-taliban-internet](https://www.wired.com/story/afghanistan-taliban-internet/)



COGS IN THE
SYSTEM:
DEMYSTIFYING
LEGAL AND HUMAN
RIGHTS AID
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COGS IN THE SYSTEM: DEMYSTIFYING LEGAL AND HUMAN RIGHTS AID MECHANISMS

Finding the right words

The reductive nomenclature of the human rights world confuses many workshop participants and complicates their identification as artists or human rights defenders. Participants from the art world shared their difficulties navigating the world of funding, especially when it comes to accessing financial aid and emergency assistance. Uncomfortable with a binary label of either artist or activist, many participants embraced the need for civil society organizations, particularly in the realm of donors and human rights aid, to reconsider their categories.

Participants who had experience working on government or institutional projects suggested that artists could likewise modify their vocabulary when articulating their need for assistance. A Myanmar-based session facilitator, activist, and poet proposed that artists try to frame their projects in keeping with measurable metrics such as those offered by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)¹⁹ and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).²⁰ For instance, one approach might be to design campaigns and projects with the goals articulated in language that corresponds to the language used in the context of the UDHR or SDGs. If, for example, an artist chooses to work on a project that intends to address gender inequality, then it would be important to ensure that the output of the project captures the action steps enshrined in Goal 5 of the SDGs, which is focused on achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.

A Philippines-based artist and activist suggested that more artists should be involved in shaping the policies affecting artistic freedom and artists' rights. This could translate into more artists considering work in policy-making and in joining local or quasi-governmental bodies.

Asking for help

Participants in the 2020 workshop expressed a desire to learn more about key human rights organizations and the resources at their disposal. To meet this need, the 2021 workshop included a training session on the various organizations and what they offered, open to participants in both workshops. This session clarified the range of aid mechanisms available to artists at risk, such as emergency and mobility grants, fellowships and residencies, and legal assistance. It also gave participants a macro perspective on the structure of the human rights ecosystem, emphasizing how stakeholders like themselves could fit into it.

During this training session, as well as during other workshop discussions, participants expressed interest in accessing various forms of help. While participants particularly stressed the need for financial and emergency relocation assistance, they also highlighted the importance of developing and accessing stronger pro bono legal assistance networks that could support them when trouble arises and provide advice on their advocacy work. As in last year's workshop, many participants emphasized the need to obtain safe and inclusive mental health care. Some prompted an important discussion of whether mental health care and counseling could be covered in emergency or health care grants that support artists at risk. In addition to institutional support, participants were eager to learn how to foster cross-border solidarity through secure communities that they could build either

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¹⁹ "Universal Declaration of Human Rights," United Nations, December 10, 1948, [un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights](https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights)

²⁰ "Do You Know All 17 SDGs?," United Nations, 2015, <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>



KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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Key Findings

In the face of intensifying threats to artistic freedom in Asia, participants stressed the importance of developing self-care protocols and building strong alliances to help artists navigate the mental and emotional toll and find support. Self-care is every bit as necessary as safety and security protocols, and making progress in this area will require new forms of technology that prize the individual and adopt an ethics-of-care approach. This approach holds that moral action hinges on interdependence and interpersonal relationships and that care and benevolence are virtues. Allies are critical lifelines, often far more so than institutional support mechanisms. Relationships with friends, peer groups, communities, and others with shared values can enable a range of invaluable assistance, from emotional, mental, and moral support to financial aid, safe houses, and legal assistance.

Participants also pointed to their diverse experiences with artistic freedom and risk, based on their countries of origin and, in some cases, the countries to which they have fled. They expressed an urgent need to articulate a definition of artistic freedom that both reflects universal artistic values and accounts for artists' widely divergent circumstances within the vast continent of Asia. To that end, the creative community must reframe policies from the inside, becoming more involved in policy making and joining local and quasi-governmental bodies.

Lastly, participants highlighted the salience of identifying more options for relocation within Asia that will allow artists to move to neighboring countries rather than to another part of the world. Regional relocation costs less, lowers logistical hurdles (permission to travel, visas, etc.), and lessens disruption, cultural alienation, and language barriers.

Recommendations

A few recommendations from the workshop:

- **Fortify safety networks**

It is critical to build or strengthen existing networks, online and offline, that reflect the needs of those forced to flee their homes as well as those who are at risk in their communities of origin. Exiles face multiple traumas resulting from isolation, disruption, alienation, and distance from their art, their audiences, their families,

their friends, and their communities. Those who remain in their communities of origin may also suffer from alienation and ostracization, along with continued threats or harassment that may prevent them from continuing their creative practice. These networks should be vigilant to potential challenges and dangers posed by commercial social media platforms.

- **Offer virtual mentoring sessions**

Vulnerable artists would benefit from virtual mentoring sessions that address a spectrum of topics, including financial security, digital safety, and emotional resilience. These sessions could also reinforce the need to build secure networks and rosters of allies and professionals like pro bono human rights lawyers. They could help educate artists on the tools and resources that are currently available to them such as emergency and relocation grants.

- **Create and distribute a digital networking toolkit**

A practical, thorough, yet concise toolkit could empower artists in remote locales to expand their communities, further their reach, and build solidarity. Beyond the connections afforded by social media, a networking toolkit could safely link far-flung artists and help them explore opportunities to share their work, including protest art.

- **Rethink definitions of art-based activism**

Human rights organizations should rethink their framing and understanding of art-based activism, moving away from reductive either-or binaries and from tired tropes that portray artists as victims. While bearing in mind the various parameters that determine funding and market support, they should reimagine their communication of these issues in a manner that acknowledges the multiple roles played by artists and the nomenclature they use to describe themselves and their work. There is also a need to establish best practices for donors that conform to global models like the [Paris Principles for Aid Effectiveness](#).

- **Track censorship more comprehensively**

With censorship worsening throughout Asia, it is imperative to deploy digital resources to systematically identify, monitor, and document cases of censorship in dangerous, volatile spaces. In tandem with these efforts, an educational campaign

GLOSSARY

ACTIVIST

A member of a group or movement campaigning for a social or political cause through direct action.

ARTIST-ACTIVIST

An artist who uses their artistic practice or a creative medium to raise awareness of issues of social, political, economic, or cultural import.

ARTIST

“Any person who creates or gives creative expression to, or re-creates works of art, who considers his artistic creation to be an essential part of his life, who contributes in this way to the development of art and culture and who is or asks to be recognized as an artist, whether or not he is bound by any relations of employment or association” (UNESCO 1980, page 3).

ARTISTIC FREEDOM

“The freedom to imagine, create and distribute diverse cultural expressions free of governmental censorship, political interference or the pressures of non-state actors. It includes the right of all citizens to have access to these works and is essential for the wellbeing of societies” (UNESCO 2019).

Artistic freedom embodies the following rights protected under international law:

- the right to create without censorship or intimidation
 - the right to have artistic work supported, distributed, remunerated
 - the right to freedom of movement
 - the right to freedom of association
 - the right to protection of social and economic rights
 - the right to participate in cultural life.
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CENSORSHIP

The suppression of words and artworks deemed offensive or unacceptable per the dominant moral code of society. This code may be defined statutorily or may be dictated by religious or community norms. In the context of this publication, censorship refers to the unjustified repression of creative works. It can be overt or covert.

CIVIL SOCIETY

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), nonprofit organizations, professionals in the cultural sector and associated sectors, groups that support the work of artists, and cultural communities (UNESCO 2005 Operational Guidelines, page 55).

CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS (CSOS)

Non-state, not-for-profit, voluntary entities formed by people in the social sphere that are separate from the state and the market. They can include community-based organizations as well as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

CLIMATE OF FEAR

A state of fear, bias, or censorship among the general public that has been incited by authorities to achieve political or sociocultural goals.

CULTURAL RIGHTS DEFENDER

Any human rights defender who upholds cultural rights in accordance with international standards. Cultural rights include the right of all to take part in cultural life without discrimination (including accessing and enjoying cultural heritage) and the rights to freedom of artistic expression and scientific freedom (OHCHR A/HRC/43/50, page 2).

ETHICS OF CARE

An approach to safeguarding individuals that prioritizes interdependence and interpersonal relationships and holds that care and benevolence are virtues.

HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDER (HRD)

A person who, “individually and in association with others,” promotes and strives “for the protection and realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms at the national and international levels” (UN 1999, page 3).

JALAN-JALAN

An Indonesian term for the act of going out for a stroll. In the context of this publication, it refers to casual social encounters among people in a community or neighborhood that lead to the organic exchange of ideas and news.

NONGKRONG

Indonesian slang for “to hang out” or “to chill together.” In the context of this publication, it refers to casual social encounters where people can meet and exchange ideas in a relaxed social setting.

SELF-CENSORSHIP

The act of censoring oneself in the interest of self-preservation or with the intention of being in accordance with the dominant moral and cultural values.