



## CHINA'S WAR ON DISSIDENT ART

September 6, 2022



Chinese-born sculptor Chen Weiming

It all sounds like something out of a spy thriller: A work by an artist exiled from his home country suddenly goes up in flames. Many brushed it off as just an accident, but the artist thinks there's something more sinister afoot. But it turns out the truth is stranger than fiction a lot of the time.

This is the story of Chen Weiming, a Chinese sculptor now living and working between New Zealand and the United States. I actually briefly mentioned Chen's work late last year when [the Pillar of Shame](#), a statue commemorating the victims of the Tiananmen Square massacre, was removed from the University of Hong Kong campus. In 2008, Chen created a replica of the Goddess of Democracy, a statue constructed by the Tiananmen Square protesters. He had it erected on the Chinese University of Hong Kong's campus until its removal last year.

One of Chen's more recent works was a large sculpture set up in the Liberty Sculpture Park in California's Mojave Desert: [a giant head](#), half of which is a skull and the other half bears the likeness of Chinese General-Secretary Xi Jinping. Large red rods protrude from the top of the head, making it appear like a coronavirus molecule. Below, on the pedestal, large red letters spell out "CCP Virus", likely in reference to China's failures leading to the spread of COVID-19.

Shortly after Chen unveiled the work, the sculpture caught fire and [was destroyed](#). Soon after the incident, Chen quickly pointed fingers at the Chinese security services. While accidents happen all the time, Chen's claims were not as far-fetched as people thought. While *CCP Virus* was destroyed in the spring of 2021, the US Justice Department has recently charged seven people with a whole litany of crimes, some of them connected to the destruction of Chen Weiming's work.

It all started when an IRS agent wouldn't accept a bribe. Evidence suggests that Americans Frank Liu and Matthew Ziburis worked with Chinese national Qiang Sun on behalf of China's security services to undermine and discredit US-based dissidents critical of the People's Republic of China. The trio's plans fell apart when Liu paid a private investigator to bribe an IRS agent to obtain one target's federal tax returns. After Liu and Ziburis's arrests, evidence suggests they were likely behind *CCP Virus*'s destruction. Ziburis also approached Chen, posing as a wealthy patron from New York who sought to commission a sculpture. During his visits to Chen's Los Angeles studio, he installed surveillance equipment on Chen's property. The Justice Department estimates all those arrested were paid around \$3 million for their services.

This is far from the first time the Chinese government has openly or secretly operated on foreign soil to disrupt the lives and livelihoods of Chinese-born dissidents. One of the most famous Chinese dissident artists today is Badiucuo, who habitually gets into trouble over his work and its criticism of Beijing. Last November, local officials in the northern Italian town of Brescia defiantly went through with organizing [a show of Badiucuo's work](#), despite protests from Beijing. Badiucuo interpreted the Chinese embassy's requests as "a direct order to the museum demanding that the show be canceled." The exhibition featured various works criticizing China's human rights record, its relationship with Hong Kong, and its handling of the coronavirus pandemic. Several of Badiucuo's works also feature the image of Winnie the Pooh. The fictional bear's image is heavily regulated in China since a series of memes from several years ago [mocked Xi](#) by comparing his appearance with that of the character. Badiucuo has continued to use Pooh imagery in relation to Xi, most notably in [a graphic work](#) posted to his Instagram account regarding House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's controversial trip to Taiwan. The image depicts Pelosi and Taiwanese president Tsai Ing-wen posing for a photo standing on top of a Winnie the Pooh bearskin rug.



Xi Jinping, General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party

Chen Weiming has since made a second version of *CCP Virus*, this time made from steel, so it would never meet the same fate as the original.



## MORE ARTICLES

Chinese Artist Gao Zhen Arrested For 'Defaming Heroes'

Making A Collage From Canaletto

Vasari Ceiling Reassembled in Venice

Demotion in Dresden: Friedrich Landscape Loses Attribution

Smelly, Upcoming Exhibition Highlights Scent In Art

All information and images displayed on this web site are the property of Rehs Galleries, Inc. and may not be reproduced in any manner or from without the express written permission of Rehs Galleries, Inc.

Rehs Galleries, Inc. is committed to providing digital services, including its websites, that are available to the widest possible audience and in accordance with accessibility standards, and is engaged in continued efforts to ensure that this website is accessible to those with special needs, including those with visual, hearing, cognitive and motor impairments. If you come across a page or feature you find inaccessible or difficult to use, or if you require or desire assistance, please contact us at: [info@rehs.com](mailto:info@rehs.com) (212) 355-5710. We thank you for your interest in our services.

Copyright 2000 - 2024 Rehs Galleries, Inc. All Rights Reserved.