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**Confinement and Freedom:  
Possibilities of Prison Arts for the Incarcerated in China**

Submitted by

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## **Abstract**

Art-making is a paradoxical activity in the prison setting if it is viewed as free expression of creative impulse. Holding a belief in the transformative power of arts, in this paper I will explore prison arts in the United States, aiming to find out what can be applicable in educating future prison staff or people incarcerated in Chinese context. Prison arts have a long history in the United States, with a variety of forms such as creative writing, theatre, drawing, painting, music and so on. By exploring the reality of incarceration, and examining examples of prison arts in the United States, I have been led to appreciate the value of prison arts for incarcerated people, for the artists who work with them, and for society at large. Understanding the value as well as the paradoxes, complexities and challenges of prison arts in the United States, I apply what I have learned to the context of prisons in China. My recommendations take three directions: the first focuses on the response to crime in general, the second points to the education within the police training academy, and the third direction is centered on bridging the worlds inside and outside the prison.

**Key Words:** prison, arts, prison arts, incarceration, artists, prison staff, criminal justice system, rehabilitation, resistance, transformation.

## Executive Summary

This paper explores prison arts in the United States and makes recommendations for changes in the criminal justice system in China. It is based on beliefs that art has a transformative power, prison arts can help to create a more humane, supportive and nurturing environment, and can create the conditions for the growth of responsible, compassionate people with the skills and capabilities to live meaningful, productive lives. The hope is that some aspects of or approaches to prison arts might be adapted to programs educating future prison staff and the incarcerated in China.

Immersed in the wide, fascinating and diverse world of prison arts, I organize the various literatures into four sections: 1. A glimpse of the history of prison arts in the United States; 2. The invisible reality in prison system---the context of prison arts; 3. Why arts in prison? 4. The practices of prison arts in the United States.

The history of prison arts shows that prison arts in the United States have a long history, which embodies the tensions between confinement and freedom. Inevitably, art in prison could never escape being affected by the general climate of the prison system.

As the context of prison arts, the reality of the prison system in the United States “is an explosive issue which goes to the very root of America’s system of justice, the structure of criminal law, the prevailing beliefs and attitudes toward a convicted felon” (as cited by Bernstein, 2010. p. 2). Thus prison art is a complicated topic which extends beyond art or prison into political, social, economic, humanistic, ideological and educational fields, and to the topics of race and racism as well.

By navigating different perspectives from artists, correction officers, and prisoners, I explore the rationale for prison arts, which touches on the right of making art, enhancing humanity, therapy, rehabilitation, self-expression, resistance against the prison life, and even liberation.

I explore the practices of prison arts by examining their sources and forms, presenting a few concrete examples and illustrating the issue of evaluation. The examples examined in this paper represent respectively the efforts from the outside world: a volunteer, a nonprofit community organization, a feminist theatrical project, an organization from university faculty and students, and a non-governmental worldwide association. The reasons I chose them are because these cases have been sustained for long time, and showed both strong ethical concern for conditions in prison and excellence in their artistic work. Meanwhile, the diversity of different artistic forms is taken into account as well.

In terms of whether prison arts should be evaluated or not, leaders of the prison arts field have disagreements. Some leaders in the field do undertake evaluations of their work. The evaluations were conducted either by quantitative or qualitative method.

After literature review, I discuss the material presented in previous sections. Firstly I point out that the significance of prison arts are shaped by the concrete context in which they occur. Secondly I analyze the different discourses of prison arts: 1) rehabilitation of incarcerated people; 2) resistance to prison environment and mass incarceration and 3) educating the broader public. Thirdly, with a borrowed framework of “the permeable membrane” (Cohen, 2011, P. 163) I

make an analysis of the elements of success of prison arts which includes the artists' ethical concern for reality, the relationship between artists and prisoners, the transformation within the creative space, and the materials transformed through art-making in prison re-entering the world of daily life, both in the prison setting and in the larger world. Fourthly, I address the main challenges that prison art work faces as follows: 1) The impact of the political climate of the criminal justice system on prison arts; 2) The closed system of prison and widespread punitive mindset about crime; 3) The contradiction between the language of art and that of prison; 4) The risk of getting desensitized to reality.

My research into prison arts in the United States has led me to appreciate their value: for incarcerated people, for the artists who work with them, and for society at large. Understanding the value as well as the paradoxes, complexities and challenges of prison arts in the United States, in the conclusion section, I try to apply what I have learned to the context of prisons in China by making recommendations in three directions: firstly, regarding the response to crime, more focus should be centered on recognizing the root causes of crimes, identifying the impact of incarceration, and finding out the preventative and constructive approaches rather than strengthening punishment; secondly, the education in the police training academy needs to have a reform in both the physical arrangement of the classroom and the content which should be more closely related to the reality of society and incorporated into arts; thirdly, it is desperately necessary that the incarcerated are to be heard and seen and to be provided more access to arts so that they can transform their lives and live more humanely.

I believe there is an urgent need for scholars, artists, educators and criminal authorities to critically think about the reality of the criminal justice system and work jointly both inside and outside the criminal justice system to dispel the misbeliefs about prison and the incarcerated, recognize the humanity and dignity of people inside as human beings, and improve conditions so they can development themselves more fully. Although this will be a long and challenging path, it is one that I am prepared to pursue. I see no other way out.

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## 1. Introduction

Several years ago, an incarcerated woman I interviewed in China told me the following story about an experience she had in prison: as part of the requirements of the prison, all inmates were required to write “diaries” and submit them to prison staff so that those diaries could be used to help the “correction” of inmates. The woman did not want to be “studied” too thoroughly by others, so later she formed a habit of writing down all the dreams she had in a notebook because she thought dreams were not direct expression. At that moment, I was impressed by her thinking.

One day, as part of their usual routine, some prison staff came to the inmates’ dormitories to search for anything that might threaten the safety of the prison. They found the notebook, read her writing about her dreams, and felt them weird and incomprehensible. Finally they confiscated the notebook, even though the dreams did not threaten anything. From then on, the woman never wrote her dreams again.

When I listened to her story, I felt regret for both the dreams that she had written and the dreams she never had a chance to write. For this woman, those dreams were like a protection of her privacy and her freedom of expression during incarceration. Unfortunately, they ended up being stopped by the violent nature of prison.

In the foreword of the book *Cellblock Vision: Prison Art in America*, a collection of visual arts made by people in prison, Roger Cardinal writes that “‘prison art’ seems self-contradictory” (Pyllis, 1997, xiii). This addresses the paradox that prison art faces: on the one hand, in its essence, art-making is an open and free expression; on the other hand, the prison environment is very much closed and is not free (1997). Art-making could seldom happen within a place of confinement, if by “art” we mean free expression of creative impulse (1997). This statement reflects the truth of the Chinese prisoner’s story.

However, if we examine prison arts, a field that is usually outside of public view, through the history of human beings, we will find that the earliest history of prison arts can be traced back to the time when the first prison was built. The history of prison arts reveals that the nature of and reason for art comes from the human being’s need and impulse for creativity, and, paradoxically, uselessness is its ultimate purpose (Balfour, 2004).

While exploring prison arts mainly in America, I find some self-taught arts within prison, as well as a number of arts programs brought into prisons by people from outside, both of which suggest that inmates, as any other human beings, have both the rights and the capabilities to make art.

For the purposes of this paper, when I use the phrase “prison arts” I refer to all arts projects and art works created by people who are or have been incarcerated, including efforts initiated by inmates, by prison educators, by artist and educators who volunteer in prison. It includes people of all ages. I use a global perspective, and focus on contemporary work, but also include works done in previous historical periods.

This paper will first provide a background and development context, and then explain the methods used. In the literature review section, this paper will look into prison arts in the United States, particularly examining a few examples of prison arts programs in detail. Focusing on

these programs, this paper will present a substantive discussion, and finally make some recommendations in the hope that some aspects of or approaches to prison arts might be adapted to programs educating future prison staff and the incarcerated in China.

## **2. Background and Development Context**

### **2.1 The concrete reality inside and outside prison system**

According to statistics provided by the International Center of Prison Studies (ICPS) in July 2011,

More than 10.1 million people are held in penal institutions throughout the world, mostly as pre-trial detainees/remand prisoners or as sentenced prisoners. Almost half of these are in the United States (2.29m), Russia (0.81m) or China (1.65m sentenced prisoners). In addition more than 650,000 are in ‘detention centers’ in China; if these are included the overall Chinese total is over 2.3million and the world total more than 10.75 million (Walmsley, 2011, p. 1).

Also, according to the numbers offered by ICPS, there were 30 jails for juveniles in China in 2005. In 2009, the Chinese government reported that there were also 320 re-education-through-labor camps, and there are more than 700 prisons housing sentenced prisoners. The number of pre-trial detention institutions and of special administrative detention facilities for drug offenders and prostitutes is unknown; however, in 2010, there were 1,650,000 sentenced prisoners in China, and the prison population rate (per 100,100 of national population) is 123 (International Center for Prison Studies, 2010).

Women prisoners are always a small minority in all prison systems. Throughout the world, the percentage of women prisoners is lower than 12%, and the average is about 6% (International Center for Prison Studies, 2005), which suggests that different countries have different attitudes and policies about the use of imprisonment for women as compared with men (2008). In China, female prisoners constitute 5.5% of the imprisoned population (2012). In terms of the trend in the female prison population, the changes in imprisonment of women compared with men are different in different countries, which indicates different approaches to imprisoning women (2008). For instance, in the United States, women prisoners are the fastest growing population of prisoners, and among women prisoners, women of color show fastest rate of growth (Fraden, 2001). In Finland and France, on the other hand, the growth rates have remained fairly stable (International Center for Prison Studies, 2008). It is hard to find an overall number for the trend in China, but according to the material provided by a provincial prison administration bureau, each year the proportion of prisoners who are women goes up (Zhejiang Provincial Prison Administration Bureau, 2008).

According to *International Profile of Women Prisons* conducted by ICPS, which looked at eighteen countries and examined eight countries in more detail, there are similarities in the type of women imprisoned in each country:

They are a very disadvantaged group even among the disadvantaged and many come from

backgrounds of abuse and violence, and have problems of addiction. A higher proportion of physical and mental problems is noted among women prisoners (2008).

Although there are no official statistics from the Chinese government, my personal work experience with women prisoners tells me this is true as well in Chinese women's prisons.

It is necessary to point out that even though women's prisons make up only a small proportion of prison system, they are affected by problems that affect all prisons. Furthermore, women's prisons have to deal with women's special needs. This becomes a big challenge for women prisons.

To most of us, prison is an invisible place, and we tend to demonize prisoners. But prison should be understood not only as a space of confinement. It is a mirror of society, reflecting all kinds of conflicts and social problems. My position in the Chinese criminal justice system afforded me the privilege of listening to numerous stories of suffering from women prisoners, stories that changed my way of understanding my society. These stories changed me from being ignorant of the real to becoming compassionate towards both reality and women in prison.

Through the stories of women prisoners and ex-prisoners, I have come to understand the path that women travel before they arrive at prison and while they are incarcerated, and what happens to them after their release. I see that they were marginalized before they ever came to prison, suffering poverty, domestic violence, and inequality. Once in prison, they are isolated from the rest of society, required to move away from their past and their original sense of self, and, in the Chinese system, to be "re-socialized" into different persons. They suffer because prison functions to de-individualize and dehumanize them through confinement, isolation, classification, observation, and punishment. They feel disconnected, angry, guilty, ashamed, desperate, worthless, repressed, labeled and untrusted. After their release, they become more marginalized than before, because the prison experience strips them of whatever minimal human capital they enjoyed prior to their incarceration. They suffer from discrimination, the disruption of their families and the lack of life choices available to them after they return to "free" society.

Not only do prisoners and ex-prisoners suffer, but also their families and the guards and the staff working in prison suffer. Rarely do people think about the suffering of inmates' children, parents, wives or husbands, but they too are punished by the prison system. Guards and staff suffer because they are also oppressed as workers by the prison system. There is nothing done to dignify their profession, and the public fails to recognize the value of their work as well.

## **2.2 My reflections on reality**

When we human beings try to fight against crime by building more prisons, applying more advanced and scientific methods in corrections, or adopting harsh policies, the results of the realities they create still fail to meet our expectation of decreasing the rate of crime. In fact, I believe the system perpetrates violence by further undermining the dignity of society's most vulnerable members. It is of urgent necessity that we reflect on existing, problematic beliefs about crime, prisoners and prison, and that we change current policies.

In terms of the causes of crime, we tend to focus on individual actions rather than on the social conditions that gave rise to limited choices. We do not see that the root of many crimes resides in society. In a speech on young people “in conflict with the law” delivered to representatives of many states and national authorities, prison staff and other guests, Augusto Boal, the founder and director of Theatre of the Oppressed, made a powerful and critical statement that “a society without Ethics breeds offenders because it itself offends”. Though he was not referring to the Chinese context in particular, to some extent, it is true as well in the Chinese society. When it comes to the fight against crime, the concrete reality is that we focus more on punishment of inmates than on transformation of the society or meaningful rehabilitation of the individual. I believe that it is time for the criminal justice system, the academics who study in criminology, and the public to realize that, while individuals need to be held accountable for their actions, we also need to take responsibility for transforming our imperfect society.

In relation to the people who become prisoners, there are misbeliefs that they are different from us, they are “them”, and they are bad. We define them solely by the crimes that they have committed. We believe that it is “safe” for us if we put them into prison. These deep rooted assumptions create all kinds of barriers between “us” and “them”. As in any situation, it is important for all of us to see their real situation of suffering, and reflect on the torn-apart human relationships.

Regarding the prison system, there are beliefs that prison is the solution to crime, and that it works. But those who believe this do not see the reality that prison is producing more problems such as aggression and hostility, and it even causes people to return, because, although there are some guards and staff who are caring, the prison system is cold and absent of the love and compassion which are required for real rehabilitation. Also, the system focuses more on disciplining inmates rather than enhancing their growth and imagining more possibilities for their lives. It is of great necessity to realize that inmates will return to “free” society someday, so their life experience during incarceration should be centered on getting prepared for that end. At the same time that we work to improve the prison system, we also need to find more life-enhancing alternatives to the system.

### **2.3 Bringing in prison arts**

In the Chinese prison system, there are some cultural and arts activities, such as writing, singing and dancing, and they are becoming more and more emphasized as part of education in prison. The document titled *Provisions of the Work of Education and Correction in Prison* which took effect on August 1th, 2003 (the 79th order, Ministry of Justice of the People’s Republic of China, 2003) says,

The work of education and correction is a significant part of penal system and a main means of correcting prisoners (Article 2). The work of education and correction includes admission education for new comers, individualized education, ideological, literacy, and vocational education, cultural construction in prison, societal assistance and education, psychological correction and therapy, electing prisoners active in correction, and education before release (Article 5).

From the above document, it is easy to tell that the underlying discourse of the cultural and arts activities in the Chinese prison system is “correction”, which means that these activities are used to serve the ideology of prison system to re-educate and re-socialize prisoners. In the context of the prison system in contemporary China, the discourse is experiencing a transition from “correction” which the Chinese prison system learned from Soviet Union to “rehabilitation” which China borrows from America (A lecture by Ming Guo, n. d.). Still, this transition takes time---both on the level of discourse and in practice.

In 1975, by observing the cultural life in the Soviet Gulag prison camps, Solzhenitsyn argued that once theatre served a political purpose by allying itself too closely with power system, it became loaded with moral propaganda and ideology, which undermined the efficacy of theatre (as cited by Balfour, 2004). Though it was theatre that Solzhenitsyn talked about, the idea applies universally to all forms of arts.

When arts are considered to be brought into prison, it is necessary to note that there are different discourses, such as discourses of rehabilitation, correction, therapy, social work, aesthetics, and salvation. It is also important to point out that art is not just for entertainment, “the fun, the ‘entertainment value’ is just the threshold”, “ultimately, the greatest art addresses the higher goal of transformation” (as cited by Cohen, 2010, p. 138). Also, art is not so sophisticated that it belongs solely to professional artists. Everybody can make art. When readers engage with this paper, it is important to remain conscious about the existing “discourses” that we ourselves carry and the views about arts we hold.

This paper will explore prison arts with a belief that prison arts can help to create a more humane, supportive and nurturing environment, and create the conditions for the growth of responsible, compassionate people with the skills and capabilities to live meaningful and productive lives. I believe that this can be done with lower cost when one considers lower rates of recidivism, and also with other benefits to the society when prisoners return to their communities with capabilities and skills. This is a belief that I have come to at a result of my research which I undertook with an open mind, not with a perceived belief.

### **3. Methods**

#### **3.1 Research methods**

In this paper, I will use several research methods as follows:

##### **3.1.1 Literature review**

Literature review is a central method used in this paper. It touches on the following topics: the history, the practice, the analysis of success and the challenges of prison arts.

##### **3.1.2 Informal interview**

I conducted several informal interviews with teaching artists, specialists in academia, and prison-arts-related-website administrators, both by face-to-face informal interviews and emails. These interviews mainly focused on the practice of prison arts, including its funding, design, implementation, impact and the challenges practitioners face.

### 3.1.3 Field visit to The Prison Creative Art Project

By attending *18<sup>th</sup> Annual Exhibition by Michigan Prisoners* in March 2013 hosted by Prison Creative Arts Project (PCAP) in Michigan, sitting in the classes with students at the University of Michigan working with youth and adults incarcerated, watching a prison theater performance, and talking with the founder, Buzz Alexander, I attained a valuable, close and direct understanding of the project.

### 3.1.4 Attending relevant Pro-Seminars, lectures, screening and courses

From the semester of 2012 fall, I have started attending any Pro-Seminars, lectures, screening and courses including Drawing, Theater, The Art of Building Peace which are relevant to my masters paper because they deepened my understanding of prison, arts, or prison arts.

## 3.2 Limitations of the research

Due to the nature of the prison system in the United States, my efforts to get involved in Boston College's prison art program in Framingham's women prison were not successful. In this paper, my knowledge about prison arts comes mainly from indirect experience, which will inevitably affect my understanding of prison arts. I hope that the combination of my own experience with women in prison will add substance and nuance to what I learned through readings and conversations, and what I am learning by exploring artistic experience, and result in a well-reasoned, compelling and useful paper.

## 4. Literature review

Once I began to explore prison arts, I have found that I stepped into a wide, fascinating, and diverse world of which it is impossible to draw a complete picture. I will integrate the various literatures I have read into this section, which will be organized into four sections: 1. A glimpse of the history of prison arts in the United States; 2. The invisible reality in prison system---the context of prison arts; 3. Why arts in prison? 4. The practices of prison arts in the United States.

### 4.1 A glimpse of the history of prison arts in the United States

In this sub-section, I rely heavily on the work of Lee Bernstein, who wrote in his book *America is the prison: arts and politics in the 1970s*: "Prison cultural expression had a history that simultaneously reacted to and departed from the repressive characteristics of all prison life, regardless of which ideology dominated at any given moment" (2010, p. 5).

"Alan Lomax, who collected songs in the prisons of Mississippi Delta in the 1930s and 1940s, linked the musical expression of southern prison farms to give even the most arduous tasks a sustaining sociability, linking inmates to each other and to an African ancestry and legacy of slavery" (Bernstein, 2010, p. 6).

During the postwar period, penal institutions conveyed competing messages to inmates. On the one hand, influenced by "the new penology" that arose during the New Deal, which held that education was a key to the change of behavior, therapists, psychologists, psychiatrists, and social workers "continued to employ a therapeutic model of personal transformation" (Bernstein, 2010,

p. 14). On the other hand, “correctional officers used primarily coercive---and to the inmates, arbitrary---power to maintain control through extensive regulations” in large, hierarchical institutions (Bernstein, 2010, p. 14).

This trend continued In the 1960s and 1970s. The difference was that although programming increased, the “access remained limited” as the “eligibility for the program was determined by ‘mental status’ and IQ, notoriously racist measurements” (as cited by Bernstein, 2010, P. 15).

Within the sharply paradoxical context, many inmates benefited from the increased opportunities of writing and arts. In addition, The National Endowment for the Arts funded the publication of prisoners’ works, other organizations created free-standing programs inside, state departments of corrections and arts commissions throughout the country undertook joint projects, PEN initiated a Prison Writing program... (Bernstein, 2010)

During the 1970s, cultural expression became a vehicle for inmates’ “personal transformation and imaginative escape”, which included “like the Jim Crow era studied by Lomax, writing workshops, theater companies, painting workshops, classrooms, and inmate-generated reading groups in radical political thought” (Bernstein, 2010, p. 6). Furthermore, a new element of collective liberation was added by “a revolutionary movement with incarcerated people among its vanguard” (Bernstein, 2010, p. 7), which led cultural expression to “become the vehicle for the incarcerated people to participate in political and social movements” seeking social change as well (Bernstein, 2010, p. 6-7).

But “the culture of prisons had an immediate and little understood impact on American public life” (Bernstein, 2010, 16).

“Perhaps most important, through their cultural work as much as their riots, incarcerated men and women insisted that they had a stake in the public debates of the day. They, along with the other social protestors of the era, led the Harvard political scientists Samuel Huntington to argue that a new ‘excess of democracy’ needed to be scaled back. Others saw the creativity and political transformation of incarcerated people as an exciting harbinger for large-scale transformation” (Bernstein, 2010, p. 17).

In the 1980s and 1990s, the state and federal began to “get tough on crime” and prison became “a more repressive regime” (Bernstein, 2010, p. 182). “By the 1980s, efforts by incarcerated people and the agencies that provided services to them would be devastated by charges that they were ‘radical chic’ or ‘limousine liberalism’, with rehabilitation made to look like an elaborate con” (Bernstein, 2010, p. 179) “As the 1990s began, state government increasingly denied funding for rehabilitation programs as either too expensive, ineffective, or both” (Bernstein, 2010, p. 176).

Through the brief summary of the history of prison arts noted above, we can see that prison arts have a long history. It is a history that embodies the tensions between confinement and freedom. Inevitably, art in prison could never escape being affected by the general climate of the prison system.

## 4.2 The invisible reality in prison system---the context of prison arts

Since prison is an unavoidable theme in this respect, here I firstly give a brief analysis of the essence of prison. In his book *Race to Incarcerate*, Marc Mauer wrote that

looking back on two centuries of the prison in America, what is particularly remarkable is how little the institutional model has changed since the nineteenth century. While the philosophical orientation and stated goals of the prison have fluctuated, the basic concept of imprisoning people in cages remains the central feature of the system (2006, p. 5).

As Michel Foucault, the influential French philosopher, wrote in his book *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*, prison, as a penal institution, fails to decrease crimes; however, it still exists today because it serves to benefit the upper class by incarcerating, isolating and disciplining the lower class so as to make them powerless and harmless politically and socially. Through discipline, prison produces ‘docile’ bodies. In this manner, the individual is instilled with the rule of society and abandons his own identity, which, according to Foucault, opposes being one’s “true self” (1979).

Coming to the current situation of incarceration in the United States, Marc Mauer said that in the last 30 years, America has been “engaged in a race to incarcerate” (2006, p. 209). Here is a set of stunning numbers: At the outset of the 1970s, there were 314,000 people incarcerated. In 2003, the number exceeded 2 million, which had risen more than 500 percent since 1972, whereas the rate of the national population during that time was only 37 percent (2006). In 2007, the population of the incarcerated has grown to 2.3 million, and each year \$60 billion is spent to run the correctional institutions (as cited by Alexander, 2010). From 1985 to 2000, a new federal or state prison was built each week, which was called the prison-building boom period, and more than half of the prisons in the United States were constructed during this period (Mauer, 2006). In the United States, 2,300,000 people are incarcerated, which constitutes 25% of the world’s prison population (as cited by Alexander, 2010, p.13).

If we have even limited interest to ask who is sent to prison, a striking fact that we cannot avoid is that race, crime, and prison population is interwoven closely in the United States. In the book *America is the Prison: Arts and Politics in Prison in the 1970s*, Lee Bernstein cited what Zayd Shakur wrote in 1970, that eighty percent of the prison population was black, brown, and yellow people, which disclosed the existence of racism and inequality in the United States (Bernstein, 2010). It is ironic that even today this fact still holds true, though the number has fluctuated more or less. As Buzz Alexander noted in his book *Is William Martinez not our brother: twenty years of the Prison Creative Art Project*, sixty-two percent of the youth at Boysville are African American, seventy-five percent of youth sentenced to adult prisons are youth of color, forty percent of prisoners in state prisons and jails are African American and 20 percent are Hispanic (as cited by Alexander, 2010, p.13).

In 1954, 98,000 African Americans were put into prisons and jails nationally. A half century later, the figure had soared to 910,000. The rate of increase in incarceration reached 829 percent, which was in a huge contrast to the 120 percent increase in the overall African Americans population (Mauer, 2006, p. 134). During a recession, when the job market shrank, people who



were “social junk” or “social dynamite” became incarcerated (as cited by Alexander, 2010, p. 42). Buzz Alexander cited the statistics from the Census of Juveniles in Residential Placement: in 1997, the custody rate of African American youth was over five times that of Caucasians; although only 23 percent of youth in Michigan were minorities that year, 61 percent of youth in detention were youth of minorities. The number has not changed. At Boysville where PCAP works, 61.7 percent of youth are African American and 3.3 percent are Hispanic (as cited by Alexander, 2010, p. 46).

There are more striking numbers cited by Buzz Alexander:

In 2005, Michigan black youth were 88 percent more likely to be arrested than whites, 50 percent more likely than whites to be referred to juvenile court, 97 percent less likely than whites to be placed into a diversion program than whites, 2.6 times more likely than whites to be placed in secure detention, 65 percent more likely than whites to have a petition filed by the prosecuting attorney, 38 percent more likely than whites to be found guilty of a delinquent offense in the Family Division of the circuit court, 54 percent less likely to get placed on probation than whites, and 4.2 times more likely than whites to be incarcerated in a secure correctional facility (as cited by Alexander, 2010, p. 46).

At midyear 2006, 41 percent of males incarcerated in federal and state prisons and local jails were African American. Relative to their numbers in the general population, about 4.8 percent of all African American men were in custody at that moment, compared to 1.9 percent of Hispanic men, and .7 percent of white men (as cited by Alexander, 2010, p. 47).

Detroit youth have the lowest urban graduation rate in America: 24.9 percent. Half of them will go to jail and prison (as cited by Alexander, 2010, p. 48).

Marc Mauer critically pointed out the essence of the prison industrial complex that “the growth of the system itself serves to create a set of institutionalized lobbying forces that perpetuate a societal commitment to imprisonment through the expansion of vested economic interests. The more than 700,000 prisons and jail guards, administrations, service workers, and other personnel represent a potentially powerful political opposition to any scaling-down of the system” (2006, p. 10-11).

Behind these terrible numbers is the destroyed African American community. To describe the impact is far beyond the scope of this paper. Bruce Western calls it the “mass imprisonment generation---black men without college education born since 1965”, and Nell Bernstein names it a “criminal caste” (as cited by Alexander, 2010, p. 48).

Though Eldridge Cleaver wrote his famous book *Soul on Ice* in 1968, his argument is not yet obsolete: “It is an explosive issue which goes to the very root of America’s system of justice, the structure of criminal law, the prevailing beliefs and attitudes toward a convicted felon” (as cited by Bernstein, 2010. p. 2).

### **4.3 Why arts in prison?**

After identifying the essence of prison and the reality of incarceration in the United States, in this part I will consider the meaning of art-making for incarcerated people by navigating different

voices, expressions and discourses from artists, correction officers, and prisoners. (Due to the limited space of this paper, the voices opposed to prison arts are not explored here, but rather appear in the discussion section of the paper.) The sections below represent the range of views, but are far from exhaustive.

#### 4.3.1 From artists

Judith Tannenbaum, a leading teaching artist and writer who speaks the importance of art making in schools, prisons, and beyond, taught poetry at San Quentin for four years in the 1980s through California's Art in Correction and in many prisons nationally since then. She argues that creating is a human birthright of prisoners as is for anybody else (Tannenbaum, 2000). She says that she never intends to transform criminals, but to recognize them as full human beings rather than men who were capable only of one worst act. What she did was to provide a space where compassion, intelligence and joy had a space to live and grow (Tannenbaum, 2002).

Buzz Alexander, a professor of University of Michigan and the cofounder of the Prison Creative Arts Project (PCAP), asserts that "every human being has the right to become more fully human being" (2010, Viii), arts are part of the efforts to "resist the humiliating and traumatic effects of incarceration" (2010, p. 26).

Many artists believe that art can play a significant role in inmates' rehabilitation in terms of offering an avenue of self-expression, enhancing self-esteem, healing the wound, reducing violence and hostility, increasing connection and cooperation, and bringing new tools and perspectives that can help inmates live more productive lives after incarceration (Balfour, 2004; Cohen, 1995).

Jonathan Shailor (2010) expresses his opinion in the book *Performing New Lives: Prison Theatre* that theatre is a basic form for human to express their needs of self-expression and identity, freedom, creativity and community.

Augusto Boal (1985), Brazilian theatre director and creator of *Theatre of the Oppressed*, argues that "all theatre is necessarily political", theatre can be "a weapon for liberation", and during the transformation of society "all must act and be spontaneously chorus and protagonist" (p. x).

There is some research on art therapy with prison inmates and its effectiveness in reducing depression, anger management, drug treatment, and other issues (Gussak, 2006, 2007, 2009; Breiner, Tuomisto, et al, 2012).

From the excerpts above, we can begin to hear of voices from artists about art-making, which touches on the right of making art, enhancing the humanity, therapy, rehabilitation, self-expression, resistance against the prison life, and even liberation.

#### 4.3.2 From correction officers

It is significant to see how prison authority and staff view arts in prison as well because they can decide if arts can get passport or support in prison. Below are listed views from two correction officers.

Jim Rowland, once the director of the California Department of Corrections, made his point about rehabilitation in this way, “some people in prison weren’t ready to take a more positive route no matter what classes and programs were offered, while some were so ready to change their lives they didn’t need any impetus”. But, “the majority was in the middle. These men and women need a vast array of possibilities because people are different, and some might be inspired by poetry and others by car repair” (Tannenbaum & Jackson, 2010, p. 169-170).

Having over twenty years of work experience in California State prisons and youth facilities, Steve Emrick was amazed by the power of the arts and the richness it brought to men behind bars. He pointed that “arts inside were the lifeline, the last piece of humanity and identity that many grabbed hold of. Men participating in the arts would cross racial, gang, and many other lines drawn in prison” (Brune, 2008, p.43).

From these messages conveyed by the corrections officers, art-making for people inside either offers them possibilities for change, or represents humanity and identity.

#### 4.3.3 From prisoners

For the individual participants of prison arts, different people have different expressions, which is largely dependent on their individual experiences of art-making.

Spoon Jackson, a prisoner who met Judith Tannenbaum who came to prison teaching poetry in 1980s, has changed from silence to a prolific writer, teacher and performer in the past twenty years. He said that the process of learning to write taught him what it meant to be a human being (Tannenbaum, 2010).

Andrew Jaicks as a participant of the creative writing workshop in Arizona state prison expressed the meaning of writing to him: “One of the worst things about being in prison is not just the helplessness and the powerlessness; it’s the fact that you feel like you’re living a purposeless existence. And one of the things that writing does for me is to give me purpose, serious purpose...” (Poetry program gives prisoners unexpected voices, June 16, 2008).

Jamie Omar Meza, another participant of the workshop said, “It gives me an avenue. It gives me direction. For the first time, I know what I want to do with myself. I’m self-taught” (Poetry program gives prisoners unexpected voices, June 16, 2008).

Germain Santana, a self-taught illustration “artist” of over 17 years (though he does not think himself as an artist and his work as artwork because he believes that names and titles are limiting), returned to drawing full time after his incarceration at the age of 19. He had drawn earlier, but this interest had faded from his life before he came to prison. While incarcerated, he gradually developed his own style, and used art to record the transformation of others and himself. He held the belief that one’s style was one’s perception and identity, and, art was not just a means of expression, but a means of liberation, freeing us from any subjective or objective bindings. “Art is a philosophy of living and perceiving existence” (as cited by Brune, 2008, p. 65).

Some inmates start making art as a way to “keep busy”, to “earn income”, to “relax” or to “escape from the tension of surviving in prison” (Alexander & Paul, 2005, p. 8-9).

Although there are a variety of expressions from the incarcerated about what art-making means for each of them, they all reflect their eager need and strong support for arts activities.

In this section we have explored the rationale for prison arts from diverse perspectives of artists, prison staff, and incarcerated people, which represent a variety of the meaning of art-making for the incarcerated. Although the interpretations are different, the commonality is that there is a huge need for art-making. In the section that follows, I will explore the practices of prison arts in the United States by examining their sources and forms, presenting a few concrete examples and illustrating the issue of evaluations.

#### **4.4 Practices of prison arts in the United States**

There have been arts made in prison, such as writing and visual arts, by self-taught artists, also, there are a number of programs coming from outside into inside. In 2007, there were 5000 or so jails (short-term incarceration) and prisons (long-term incarceration) around the United States, one-fifth of which offered art programs. Usually, jails tend to offer fewer classes than prisons because of the greater turnover of inmates (Grant, 2007).

In the following part, I will mainly look at prison arts programs in which people from outside come to share their arts with people inside. The topics that will be touched on are: forms and sources of prison arts, a few examples of practices of prison arts programs, and the impacts of prison arts.

##### 4.4.1 Sources and forms of prison arts

The prison arts programs come from a wide range of sources. For instance, in some states prisons contract with an outside agency to hire art teachers and buy materials. Others provide art classes through their education departments. Some arts programs are provided by teachers from local colleges or volunteers (Tannenbaum, 2002).

There is as wide a variety of forms of artistic expressions in prison as there is in the free world. For instance, participants in San Quentin Arts Program have produced anthologies, plays, paintings and prints, as well as musical compositions (William James Association, n. d.), and participants of the Corrections Residency Program in New Hampshire did drumming, weaving, collage, storytelling, dance, mask-making, song-writing, and poetry workshops (Cohen, 1995).

It is necessary to point out that many art works made by inmates go to the public, which provides a chance for inmates to be seen and heard in public space and helps dispel stereotypes about inmates by the public. For instance, there have been some anthologies and memoirs published, art exhibitions held, and public performances done.

##### 4.4.2 A few examples of prison arts

Due to limited space, this section will present the practices of prison arts programs within the United States by examining five examples, which represent respectively the efforts from a volunteer, a nonprofit community organization, a feminist theatrical project, an organization from university faculty and students, and a non-governmental worldwide association. The reasons I chose them are because these cases have been sustained for long time, and showed both

strong ethical concern for conditions in prison and excellence in their artistic work. Meanwhile, the diversity of different artistic forms is taken into account as well.

#### 4.4.2.1 Richard Shelton---a volunteer launching Creative Writer's Workshop

Richard Shelton, a poet and Professor in the English department at the University of Arizona in Tucson, has been as a volunteer teacher for the past more than thirty years, directing a program of creative writing workshops in Arizona State Prison system.

He started his experience in the early 1970s when a young man on death row sent him a letter requesting feedback from him after reading his recently published poetry. In his beautiful memoir *Crossing the Yard: Thirty Years as a Prison Volunteer*, Richard Shelton shared his experience about how his choice led him “through bloody tragedies and terrible disappointment to a better understanding of what it means to be a human” (2007, p. 9), how he began to know the talents of the imprisoned, the transformative power of writing, the meaning of being compassionate and his intensive concern for the prison industrial complex. Believing that we are the system, Richard Shelton encouraged volunteerism with people in prison and post release, which he argued could make a difference between former inmates making it or not making it in the outside world, as well as help the prison system to be more transparent to the public (2007). He ended his book with the touching and thoughtful sentence: “I want to put my head down on the table in front of me and weep with a pain that will not be comforted and a rage I cannot express” (Shelton, 2007, p. 232)

#### 4.4.2.2 The William James Association (WJA) and the Prison Arts Project

WJA is “a nonprofit, community service corporation founded in 1973 by Page Smith and Paul Lee”. It “is named for the American philosopher, William James, who was deeply concerned with the relationship between philosophical thought and social action”. The goal of the association is to promote “work service in the arts, environment, education, and community development” (William James Association, n. d.).

Out of Eloise Smith's vision that arts as the “mysterious life-enhancing process” can often produce magic and her efforts, WJA began the Prison Arts Project (PAP) as a pilot program at the California Medical Facility, a prison in Vacaville, CA in 1977. Since then, “WJA has dedicated itself to providing in-depth, long-term arts experiences for incarcerated individuals” by selecting, hiring, and contracting with professional visual, literary and performing artists to teach in California state prison facilities, with a firm belief that “participation in artistic process significantly and constructively affects one's view of oneself and the world” (William James Association, n. d.).

Given the fact that “the prison system punishes negative behaviors but offers little to replace them” under its “repressive environment and culture of extreme power imbalance”, the Prison Art Project recognizes that “the capability of personal change is great”, and strives to create a space for inmates to participate in arts, which comes with “respect, courtesy and an openness to unique expression as creative human beings” (William James Association, n. d.). As a participant said,

There are general feelings of hostility and hopelessness in prisons today and it is getting worse with overcrowding... Art workshops and similar programs help take us out of this

atmosphere and we become like any other free person expressing our talents. Being in prison is the final ride downhill unless one can resist the things around him and learn to function in a society which he no longer has any contact with. Arts programs for many of us may be the final salvation of our minds from prison insanity. It is contact with the best of the human race. It is something that says that we, too, are still valuable (William James Association, n. d.).

In order to evaluate the effects of AIC program, a pair of university studies was conducted in 1980s. The result of the studies showed that participants in the AIC program had “75% fewer disciplinary actions and a 27% lower recidivism rate than the general prison population”, which meant the reduction of incarceration cost and improved human lives (William James Association, n. d.).

PAP also establishes Artist-In-Residence program for the National Endowment for the Arts and the Federal Bureau of Prisons (William James Association, n. d.).

The success of PAP “led to the formation of Arts-in-Corrections in 1981, an administrative office within the California Department of Corrections”, which operates in the state’s twelve correctional institutions and “oversees the staffing of artist-facilitators at all prisons in California”. Unfortunately, all Arts-in-Corrections (AIC) artists’ contracts were ended because of a budget crisis in California state government in January 2003. Now WJA hires “a few professional artists to teach at San Quentin State Prison and the women’s unit of the California Rehabilitation Center in Norco”, with “limited funding from private sources” (William James Association, n. d.).

Based on the experience of the success of the Prison Arts Project, WJA also established Community Youth Arts Project to “intervene with youths at risk of incarceration or other marginalization” (William James Association, n. d.).

In June 2010, WJA was chosen to receive ChangeMaker Award from San Francisco’s Interaction for the Arts which “celebrates artists and organizations making a profound impact in the world... who inspire collaboration; embrace experimentation, integrity, and evolution; and encourage civic and community exchange and engagement” (William James Association, n. d.)

#### 4.4.4.3 Imagining Medea: Theater for Incarcerated Women

*Imagining Medea: Theater for Incarcerated Women* is a feminist theatrical project led by Rhodessa Jones, which results from the collaboration between women in the San Francisco Country Jail system and women performers from the outside (Jones, 2001).

Putting its name under Medea, the classic Greek play, the Medea Project drew similarities between Medea and the incarcerated women. It begins with honoring the personal experience that each woman has, believing that the incarcerated women’s experiences have to be acknowledged, understood, related, and heard. Beyond those personal experiences, the Medea Project interpreted the real identities of the incarcerated women by putting those personal stories into social contexts, including race, class, education, gender, desire, and family. In this way, the Medea Project combines the belief in the validity of personal experience with a belief that the subject is socially constructed (2001).

The Medea Project brought incarcerated women into public space to perform, which allows them to flee from the inside and become visible on public stage, and affords the audience with access to stories from inside. Furthermore, by asking questions about why these women rather than others are sent to prison, why more women are going into prison, and how the incarceration of women affects society, the Medea Project challenges its audience's comfortableness with the prison industrial complex, their responsibilities for creating the context in which the incarcerated women live, and calls for awareness of the invisible and of making change as more socially active citizens. In this way, the Medea Project is not a theater for the incarcerated women, but also for us all (Jones, 2001).

#### 4.4.4.4 The Prison Creative Art Project (PCAP)

PCAP is a project begun from a theater class by Buzz Alexander in 1990, which later started sending University of Michigan professors and students to work with youth in urban high schools, youth in juvenile facilities, and adult men and women in prisons.

In the field report of the project *Is William Martinez not our brother: twenty years of the Prison Creative Art Project*, Buzz Alexander firstly clarified the essence of their work as public scholarship which is against academic "overemphasis on critique", "rejects professional withdrawal from the public as well as college and university intervention in communities only as advocated, problem-solvers, and volunteers who practice 'service learning'" (Alexander, 2010, p. 2). He emphasized that their work is "public work" that community members, students, and faculty practice "everyday politics" and "democratic behavior through civic engagement" (2010, p. 3).

Then Buzz Alexander disclosed the stunning reality of the mass incarceration in the United States, which has been noted earlier. He cited Marc Mauer's words that critically analyzed the factors that perpetuate the belief that prison works: "thirty years of politically inspired rhetoric, willful ignorance of research and programmatic developments, and constrained policy options have conspired to make the United States choose the most punitive of responses" (2010, p.50).

Following that, Buzz Alexander questioned the universal silence that we lived with and regarded as normal by stating that it is the ethical indifference that made the reality invisible (2010, p.50). As Robert Moses identified, the central problem of our country was "we do not think of other children as our own" (as cited by Alexander, 2010, p.50). Continually, he disclosed that we are all "bystanders", "wardens and guards are our surrogates, and they are intimately locked in a deadly embrace with their human captives behind the prison walls. By extension so are we" (as cited in Alexander, 2010, p. 50-51).

Against the widespread ethical indifference, Buzz Alexander organizes his students, mostly white, female, affluent, and well-educated, to work together with youth in juvenile facilities and adults in prison, mostly African American, Hispanic, poor White, male, and without enough education. Guided by the principle of respect, barriers are broken down, differences are embraced, and trust is built (2010).

Through the deep and detailed account of the book, the process through which PCAP has developed into an excellent prison art program was presented to readers. PCAP leads a variety of creative workshops of writing, music, dance, visual arts and plays in urban high schools, adult

correctional facilities, and juvenile facilities in Michigan, which encourages participants to bring in their own creativities and engage equally. PCAP has a portfolio project in which university students and community volunteers help youths in high schools and juvenile facilities and adult prisoners create their portfolios which include their artworks of writing, dance, music, performance and their statements and resumes. The portfolios, as the evidence of their growth, could be presented to their families, friends, judges, mentors, and employers. Another initiative of PCAP is the linkage project designed to help returning citizens to affirm their creativity by offering them workshops, an annual conference, performance/exhibition opportunities, and other activities associated with arts. PCAP has held art exhibitions by prisoners since its inception in 1996, which serves as a bridge between the inside and outside, and has been recognized nationally and grown to be the largest exhibition of prison art in the United States (Alexander, 2010).

#### 4.4.4.5. PEN---an international association for writers

PEN, a non-political, non-governmental worldwide association of writers founded in 1921, advocating for freedom of expression as human rights and insisting that “freedom of expression and literature are inseparable” (PEN, n. d.). “The name was conceived as an acronym: ‘Poets, Essayists, Novelists’ (later broadened to ‘Poets, Playwrights, Editors, Essayists, Novelists’” (PEN, n. d.). It initiated a Prison Writing program in 1971. The program “believes in the restorative and rehabilitative power of writing and provides a space for inmates to express freely and encourages the use of words as a legitimate form of power” (PEN, n. d.). It sponsors an annual prison writing contest as one of the few outlets of free expression for the incarcerated, provides guidance on writing for prisoners by publishing a free handbook and sending free copies to prisoners, and offers one-on-one mentoring to inmates, conducts workshops, and promotes inmates’ work publicly through publications and readings (PEN, n. d.).

The five examples listed above represent the tireless and dedicated efforts from outside to engaging in prison arts, which covers different sources including the individual, the community, the university, and the worldwide organization. In this sense, they are a bridge between inside and outside, representing a diverse range of possibilities of change for the incarcerated and the prison system. Although they have different entry points and emphasis, they all recognize the dignity and agency of the incarcerated, and the power of arts in processes of transformation. It has to be noted that most of them have existed for over twenty years or even longer, which inspires us to pursue change in prison system and offers us countless experience to work with the incarcerated. Although Imaging Medea has a shorter history compared to other examples, it offers a methodology of interpreting an individual woman’s story in a larger social context.

So far, through exploration of five examples, I have introduced the practice of prison arts in the United States. Next I will focus on the issue of evaluation of prison arts.

## **4.5 Impacts of prison arts programs**

### 4.5.1 Evaluation or not?

Leaders of the prison arts field disagree about whether prison arts should be evaluated or not.

While many might want to know the impact of prison arts, Judith Tannenbaum was against the tendency that we try to convert and count everything with numbers. She argued that to expect



arts to reduce recidivism was like expecting artists to cure cancer. She was against the expectation of changing criminals because she thought that mindset was based on the assumption that criminals were people defined solely by their crimes, which didn't hold truth. For her, she said, the question she cared about was to talk about the men she had come to know, what they had shared, and the world of prison she had witnessed. By putting their work into the world, demanding inclusion, and finding room at the table, the voice of the previously silenced people will be heard (Tannenbaum, 2000).

Other leaders in the field do undertake evaluations of their work. Their methods and findings are described below.

#### 4.5.2 How?

In the materials I have found, evaluations were conducted either by quantitative or qualitative method.

As mentioned earlier, evaluation of the Arts-in-Corrections programs of the California Department of Corrections was conducted, and the method used was cost-effectiveness analysis.

Marc Mauer compared the cost-effectiveness of incarceration to the cost-effectiveness of alternatives, but then he added,

Such analysis can lose sight of the human factors involved...when one of our loved ones is ill or in trouble, most of us rarely hesitate to employ whatever financial or human resources we can muster to deal with the problem. This might involve specialized medical care, tutors for learning-disabled children, or a nursing home for an aging relative. Deciding how to use taxpayer funds wisely is a contentious issue, of course. One is led to wonder, however, to what extent the zeal with which the efforts are made to demonstrate the value of imprisonment is a reflection of the "otherness" of those being incarcerated (Mauer, 2006, p. 129).

In the Corrections Residency Program in New Hampshire during 1994-1995, stories were collected from interviews with artists, inmates, corrections educators and administrators from the Women's prison, the Men's prison, and the Youth Development Center. In the report, Cynthia Cohen summarized the impact of the program on three levels - the immediate benefits for inmates, the possibilities beyond incarceration and new awareness for staff and artists. The immediate impact on participants are: enhancing self-esteem, reducing barriers among inmates, connecting different cultures, cooperating, feeling a sense of pride in culture, constructively expressing feelings, finding motivation, tools, and perspective, bringing new perspectives to inmate's teaching and learning. The possibilities beyond incarceration include tools to look at life in a different way and a kind of rehab people take with them. For staff and artists, a big change for them is that they developed a new way of looking at the people inside (Cohen, 1995).

It seems that the disputes over whether or not to do evaluation are without compromise due to different views of understanding and interpreting the world. I do not think that either of them is wrong. It would be over simplified to say that each side serves as an addition to each other. But at least, the disagreement itself is instructive, leaving space for further discussion and debate, either on how to evaluate human behaviors or whether or not art, as an aesthetic experience,

should be expected to have any practical effect. In next section I will engage in a discussion of prison arts based on the sections above.

## **5. Substantive Discussion**

Immersed in a comparative wealth of deep and rich materials, I realize that I am challenged to summarize and discuss them in the following few pages. It is challenging not only because of the large amount of materials but also because the topic goes beyond art or prison and into political, social, and educational fields, and the topics of race and racism as well. In this section I will navigate among the different materials and serve as a facilitator of conversation between the resources and readers. Firstly I will point out that prison arts are the results of the concrete context, and then state the different discourses of prison arts. After that, I will make an analysis of the success of prison art programs and finally address the challenges that prison arts face.

### **5.1 Prison arts---product of the context**

It seems that the practice of prison arts in the United States has been existed over years. Bernstein wrote that “without the structures left in place by the 1970s, there would be virtually no aesthetic programming in U.S. prisons” (Bernstein, 2010, p. 183). Of course, it has to be admitted that the presence and quality of some prison arts programs are dependent on political, social, economic, humanistic, ideological and professional context at any given particular time and place. It is also important to note that while this context probably influences all prison arts programs to some degree (especially in terms of access to prisoners, etc.), prison arts initiatives that are based on volunteer effort or on funding from outside sources, including universities, might actually be more stable (because they are not vulnerable to shifts in political leaders and political climate).

### **5.2 Discourses of prison arts**

The disagreement about the role of prison arts has been going on for several decades. Back to 1979 when a conference on theater in prison was held by the Center for the Advanced Study in Theatre Arts at the City University of New York’s Graduate center, there was a debate about the value of theatre programs then in existence, with a varying and contradictory points of view including entertaining, changing the social and criminal justice system, rehabilitation; developing personal skills, stretching imagination, and training for future career (Bernstein, 2010, p. 129). Today, these voices can still be found.

Based on what I have found, I would like to classify the roles of art-making into three general types: one is rehabilitation which includes therapy; the other is resistance to prison environment and mass incarceration; and educating the broader public.

As to the arts with the goal of “rehabilitation”, which can be broken up into diverse expressions such as anger control, violence reduction, self-esteem building and so on, they serve the criminological goal. The concept of rehabilitation conveys a concern with treatment that can prevent criminals from committing further crimes, which “tends to be linked to the image of the determined actor, who whilst having some degree of agency, is propelled by social misfortune of biological deficiency” (Balfour, 2004, p. 8). Focusing on offenders’ “belief systems and their interpretative frameworks”, rehabilitation programs are “designed to alter or remove conditions operating on offenders which are deemed responsible for their illegal behavior” (Balfour, 2004, p.

8). So “rehabilitation is generally framed within the paradigm of the useful (re-socialization into a life full of purpose)” (Balfour, 2004, p. 3). If the aesthetic experience is to focus on individuals’ “efficacy to change behaviors”, and to encourage “social responsibility and moral maturation”, it will “bring us to a rather threatening concept: that society engages the science of criminology as a ‘disciplinary of technology’, with the aim of socializing deviant citizens into behaving according to moral (or legal) ‘norms’ (as cited by Balfour, 2004, p. 9). “Whether or not this process is indeed a threatening one depends on one’s perception of how socialization connects with the ‘culture’ and ideologies of a society” (Balfour, 2004, p. 9).

When he writes about prison theatre, Michael Balfour uses the metaphor of a “tightrope” to describe the tension between incorporation into and resistance to the criminal justice system within which prison theatre seeks to exist. He warns us that on the one hand, in order to get visa, prison theatre needs to approach and incorporate into the criminal justice system; on the other hand, it has to beware of the paradox of the creative work within a system of punishment and rehabilitation. “To not understand this uneven landscape is to blunder around it without a compass, map and a healthy sense of direction” (Balfour, 2004, p. 3). Although he was talking about prison theatre, I think his point of view is applicable for all the other prison art works as well.

Buzz Alexander also expresses the subtle paradox between prison and art: “prisons are complex worlds with rich and varied dimensions, yet the predominant communication is one of power, constraint, limitation, containment, an impulse to deny, take away, restrict. The predominant communication is not about creativity, enlarging personal capacity, growth” (2010, p.108). Prison works for confinement, whereas art works for creation. They are two languages, representing two opposite directions.

The examples evidenced in the literature review part, though merely a fragment of a huge picture of prison arts, show an increasing awareness of the possibilities of art in prison which is far beyond the discourse of rehabilitation. “The poetic imagination needs to be an irritant that makes the ‘system’ conscious of ‘the degradation of its mechanization’” (as cited by Balfour, 2004, P. 17). All the examples exhibit a strong ethical concern for the reality of prison system in their work. From what they had experienced with people inside, the artists got to know the reality, then began to critically reflect on and address it as passionate activists (Tannenbaum, 2000, 2010; Alexander, 2010; Shelton, 2007). Judith Tannenbaum believes that it is her duty to speak out to the world about what she has witnessed (2000). In *Doing time, making space: 10 years of the Annual Exhibition of Art by Michigan Prisoners*, Buzz Alexander and Janie Paul make a further powerful and explicit statements, which claim that they are against mass incarceration and the prison environment, and that making art is a way to resist the oppressive and devastating environment in prison life (2005).

It has to be pointed out that in contrast to prison arts either as a detachment from or opposition to the prison system in the United States, the practice of prison arts in Chinese context seems an integral part of “education” or “rehabilitation” serving the criminal justice system, rather than being distant from or against the system. Different discourses hardly exist, which may largely result from the whole regime.

### 5.3 Elements of success

In the following part, I will interpret the work of prison arts noted earlier, with a hope to draw some insightful wisdom and practical experiences. Here I will borrow a notion of “the permeable membrane” (Cohen, 2011, volume 2, p. 163) elaborated by Cynthia Cohen in *Acting together: performance and the creative transformation of conflict*. Though it is used as a framework of peacebuilding performance, I do find that it resonates with prison art as well.

Simply put, “permeable membrane” is a porous boundary like the membrane around a “nucleus”, through which elements from the real world enter a creative space, are transformed, and then reenter the ordinary world of everyday life. In peacebuilding art, the permeable membrane is composed of “the aesthetic and the ethical sensibilities of artists and cultural workers, animated by the moral imagination---the capacity to be in touch with, and grounded in, limitations and suffering of the real world, and simultaneously to imagine and work toward a more just and more life-enhancing imagined order” (Cohen, 2011, volume 2, p. 162).

Below I will touch on four elements essential to “permeable membrane” framework: the artists’ ethical concern for reality; the relationship between artists and prisoners; the transformation within the creative space; and the materials re-entering the world of daily life.

#### 5.3.1 A duty of citizenship against ethical indifference

Confronting the concrete reality of incarceration and the culture of silence, individual artists, non-profit organizations, faculty and students show their strong ethical sensibility of the concrete reality, and seek to respond to it by engaging themselves in the effort to transform it in different ways.

As Buzz Alexander said, we cannot be neutral, we must make a decision. It (PCAP) is a political activity (talk with Buzz Alexander on March 27, 2013). Beyond that, he located the root reason for the universality of ethical indifference to education. He cited Jonathan Kozol’s point of view to illustrate that it was the school system that teaches us

to be ‘good citizens’, smart, imaginative, intelligent, well-intentioned but are ethically indifferent to the sufferings and struggles of others, unconscious of the violence around us, or if conscious, not inclined to do much or anything about it, though we might volunteer and donate to charity. Through fragmentation of our learning, through group citations of the Pledge to the Flag, through elimination of ‘I’ from our essays, through emasculation and taming of major rebellious figures we study, through obscuring the fact that great figures were once children like us, through softening, diminishing and managing our inclination to righteous anger or action, through celebrating individuals achievements, the schools divert our force into safe channels  
(2010, p. 88).

Buzz Alexander’s criticism of the educational system echoes the internationally popular and widely regarded book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, in which Paulo Freire recognizes that the whole education system serves as “one of the major instruments for the maintenance of the culture of silence” (1970, P. 11). He holds a strong belief that as long as every human being has access to “proper tools” for a dialogical encounter with others, s/he is capable of perceiving

his/her “personal and social reality and contradictions in it”, aware of his/her “perception of the reality and deal critically with it”, “no matter how ‘ignorant’ or submerged in the ‘culture of silence’ he may be” (p. 13). Based on the conviction, he challenges the old, paternalistic teacher-student relationship and declares that both teachers and students are Subjects either in the task of unveiling that reality or in the talk of re-creating that knowledge. “Authentic education is not carried on by ‘A’ for ‘B’ or by ‘A’ about ‘B’, but rather by ‘A’ with ‘B’” (p. 82). Only through committed involvement in the “dialogue” with “love, humanity, faith”, can the “mutual trust” be developed (p. 79-80). He warns us that education cannot be “neutral”. It either functions to integrate the younger generation into the present system and lead them to “conformity”, or becomes “the practice of freedom”, by which people can reflect on reality critically and creatively and “participate in the transformation of their world (1970, p. 15).

If light of what Paulo Freire wrote, I believe what Alexander does with his students is real education. By sending students to lead workshops in juvenile facilities and prisons, he builds a bridge between inside and outside, which affords his students an opportunity to encounter the social reality and reflect on their former consciousness of reality and prisoners. Buzz Alexander believes that “all of us have been deprived by the walls between us”, and there is always a potential for us to find something missing “between us”, “among us” from the workshops that are “charged with this possibility” (Alexander, 2010, p. 92). In this way, he responds to the common indifference to reality (2010). Also, he emphasizes the factor of trust---both in his students and in people incarcerated. He believes that his students can work with people inside, though it is hard, and he also encourages his students to trust people they work with that they can think, they can grow, and they can create. In terms of the teacher-student relationship, he clarifies that in his class, he does not lead or even facilitate the process, and he is in the circle (2010). In this sense, the relationship is a horizontal dialogue that Paulo Freire emphasizes. In PCAP’s practice, education plays a subversive role in resistance to the silence of culture.

### 5.3.2 The connection between “us” and “them”

To work with people inside, it cannot be overemphasized that equality, trust, humanity and respect is important, given the fact that these elements are rare in a repressive environment with a culture of extreme power imbalance. In the practice of prison arts mentioned early, a common emphasis is breaking the barrier and finding deep connection between “us” and “them”.

Judith Tennenbaum warns us that the tendency to define criminals merely by their crimes “divide the world into *us-and-them* and then to treat *them* as less than human, as different from *us*” (2002, p. 15). She encourages us to understand the reality of a person in prison by a simple exercise:

For a moment, think of the worst thing you have ever done. Whatever it is, remember it well. Now imagine that this act is all you are known for. Imagine that everything in your world is designed to treat you as a person defined by that act. Any other fact of your life---any fact of love, kindness, compassion, intelligence, joy, humor---is irrelevant. You are the only a person who has done this worst thing. That’s it, that’s you, from now till forever” (2002, p. 14).

From the exercise, she emphasizes that criminals express their humanity in a range of ways, all of which have been ignored. In her poetry class, she makes it to be a space where “everyone in the room---prisoners, cops, secretaries, or poets---is simply *us*, human beings together” (2002, p. 15), though such situations in prison are rare.

Maud Clark, who has been working with women in prison and post release for over twenty years in Somebody’s Theater Company in Australia, argues that to start, equality plays a central role in working creatively, and practitioners need to redefine their relationship with people in prisons. “Not being as an educator, or a therapist, or someone who speaks the orthodox language of rehabilitation, de-professionalize a practitioner, and make them vulnerable again” (as cited by Balfour, 2004, p. 13).

In terms of PCAP’s practice, Buzz Alexander explains the way his students work with people inside:

We bring our background, personalities, talents, and skills, and throw them into the mix. We get down to the task. It is not about talk, not about theory, not about instructing, it is about collaboration and premix. In a way, it is magic. The differences remain and evaporate (2010, p. 84).

He also describes the process in which separation is crossed in the workshop when his students worked with incarcerated youth and adults:

At the outset, workshop members may experience some suspicion and awkwardness and even raise challenges based on what is true in the stereotypes they have of each other. Yet the negotiation of the social and political divides actually is not difficult. Normally the fears disappear by the end of the first or second session. Entertaining, wacky, low-risk acting exercises (and drawing and writing exercises in other workshops) in which everyone participates lead gradually to a space of vitality, risk and respect where everyone deepens their participation and struggles to bring forth their own stories, images, and ideas. The collaborative task of creating, week by week, a quality of public performance further draw everyone together across superficial and real barriers (Alexander, 2010, p. 68).

As depicted above, working with people inside is a process of challenging the dualistic polarities such as right and wrong, and good and evil; breaking down misconceptions about each other; overcoming alienation; affirming each other; and restoring humanity. This process is exactly what John Paul Lederach states about “paradoxical curiosity” (2005, p. 35). In this way, the humanity of all of us is enlarged.

### 5.3.3 The creative transformation within prison setting

From the artistic work done by artists and prisoners together, I can feel that artists have a faith in art and in the transformative power of art. Since there is a diverse range of artistic forms that people work with---creative writing, drawing, painting, theatre, poetry, music, and so on, and the transformative process of each form of artistic expression is unique, I will not focus on the aesthetic process of each form of art, but only draw a general analysis about the meaning of transformation within a creative space in prison environment.

Whatever the artistic activity is, when a person is transforming, he/she is transformed. For instance, when a person is transforming words into a poem, he/she is transformed into a poet; when a person is transforming voice into music, he/she is transformed into a musician; when a person is imagining a better society in theatre, he/she is transforming reality and he/she is transformed into a citizen. In this process, his/her humanity is enhanced because “only human being is capable of creating culture. When she creates culture and invents arts, the human being achieves the feat of becoming human, without losing her animal condition” (Boal, 2006, p. 118).

Regarding the transformative activity in prison, as Janie Paul states in *Doing Time, Making Space*, in order to live a prison life in a positive way, prison artists have to “transform time” while doing time (2005, p. 10). For visual artists, the transformation happens when they create visual images “transforming time into space” (2005, p.10). She depicts that prison artists transform prison life from “nothingness into something active and alive” by making visual arts:

In resistance of the barrenness of prison, artists create images of beauty, joy and celebration. In resistance to poverty of resources, there is inventiveness of materials. In resistance to uniformity, there is idiosyncrasy and freshness of vision. In resistance to the hidden devastation and violence of prison, artists depict harsh realities that we need to know about. In resistance to the coldness of prison, artists create images of love and tenderness. And in resistance to invisibility, artists create images of themselves (2005, p. 10-22).

Her statement claims that transformation in the process of art-making in the prison setting counters the devastating and dead force of prison.

#### 5.3.4 Materials reentering the reality

The transformation in a creative space produces new materials (i.e. new insights, new awareness, new stories, transformed relationships, etc.) which flow back into the world of daily life. From the creative transformation in art-making, prisoners develop new awareness of themselves, restored agency, new dignity, and new hope. The human being is a creator; once he/she starts creation, it sparks more creation. “Every discovery brings with it the necessity of new discoveries; every invention begs interventions” (Boal, 2006, p. 118).

From what Buzz Alexander says about the art exhibition by Michigan prisoners, we can see that how access to arts ignites them and how they want growth as eagerly as we do: in the selection room prison artists are together and before and afterwards, exchanging ideas and experiences, and they form their own circles with leadership; if transferred, they try to find similar communities in new places; through art exhibition, “a general community of artists has sprung up across the system” (Alexander, 2010, p. 126).

Many artworks by prison artists---memoirs, anthologies, visual artworks, poems, and any others--flow into outside world, having effects in different ways. For example, Spoon Jackson, after writing poems for over twenty years in prison in the United States, has grown to be a renowned writer and poet worldwide. His poems have spread to Estonia and Russia and he has gotten letters from those places. Students from American criminal justice classes and college prison literature classes have written to him asking for help with term papers. He teaches two creative writing classes in prison. And he encourages others in prison to seek the gift that can free them:

We must each do our part, despite the fact that our lives on the streets are only memories and dreams that may perish with us. Brothers and sisters---my people behind walls, no matter where you are around the world---walls cannot harness or stop our hearts, souls, and minds. Let your words, songs, and music flow. Keep it real and pass the realness on to others” (Tennenbaum & Jackson, 2010, xv).

The public is also challenged by the artwork by prisoners:

Last year over 4,000 people came to see the Annual Exhibition of Art by Michigan Prisoners. What they saw were 343 works of art--each one a world created by someone who had been made invisible. By their struggle, invention, persistence, knowledge, practice, joy and growth each artist has asserted the complexity, individuality and richness that make up a human being. The vividness of their presence on the walls of the gallery demand that we think hard about who we perceive and judge each other, whom we banish from the world and why, and what kind of change we think is possible in a human life (Alexander & Paul, 2005, p. 23).

It is not only the artwork that communicates to the outside world, but also the testimony of the artists from the outside who speak out about the people and the conditions they meet on the inside. For instance, Judith Tennenbaum, since she taught poetry in San Quentin in the 1980s, has become committed not only to sharing art with people inside, but to speaking to the larger world about what she has witnessed in prison by writing, publishing books, and speaking publicly (Tennenbaum & Jackson, 2010; Tennenbaum, 2000).

The students as members of PCAP, spread the project by word-of-mouth, and enter different places and fields of work with PCAP’s vision and commitment (Alexander, 2010).

From above, we can see that on the one hand, artists from different backgrounds are firmly grounded in the ethical concern for the role of criminal justice and the underlying racism and inequality in the United States society. On the other hand, they are engaged in working with people inside with a faith in the transformative power of art. After the transformation within the creative space of art, new elements developed out of art-related activities from inmates, artists, and the public re-enters into the daily life in prison and the free society, affecting people’s awareness, beliefs, attitudes and sometimes, action.

## **5.4 Challenges**

Working within prison is challenging in many ways. This part will address the main challenges that prison art work faces.

### **5.4.1 The impact of the political climate and the overwhelming incarceration of the criminal justice system on prison arts**

It has to be noticed that prison arts programs have always been and still are greatly affected by political and economic climate of correctional justice system which swings between rehabilitation and harsh punishment, especially when the work is financially dependent on the criminal justice system. For instance, a punitive correction mentality may diminish or cancel programs, and a financial crisis may reduce funding for prison art programs. In 1994 Congress



cancelled Pell grants by which inmates got funded to enroll higher-education courses held inside prisons, based on the argument that “such distribution came at the expense of ‘deserving’ students in the outside world”, ignoring the fact from the research that education lowers rates of recidivism (Mauer, 2006, p. 200). When the book *By Heart: Poetry, Prison, and Two Lives* was written by Judith Tannenbaum and Spoon Jackson in 2010, it seemed that “Arts-in-Corrections and almost all programming will be eliminated from California prisons” (Tannenbaum & Jackson, 2010, p. XV).

Meanwhile, the overwhelming incarceration driven by economic profits poses a huge challenge for prison arts. It seems that no matter how much prison arts are done, it is far from enough.

#### 5.4.2 The closed system of prison and widespread punitive mindset about crime

Prison is a closed system, and it seldom enters the view of the public. What’s more, punishment has been a long-standing reflex as a social response to crime, which has become a deeply rooted mindset of the public. Both of these constitute obstacles that prevent prison art from getting public support.

For example, Judith Tannenbaum depicted in her book *Disguised as a poem: my years teaching poetry at San Quentin* how another artist Lynnelle who worked on Death Row was questioned by reporters quite often in interviews. The question was “Why do these people deserve art? Look at what they have done.” She did not have an easy answer, as Judith Tannenbaum said,

It’s not like my students are going to be back on the streets and so should have something positive that they can find out about themselves before they are returned to the community. No, my students are going to die. Why do they deserve art? My belief system says we are here on this earth for a purpose, and part of it is the progression of our soul or our spirit, and what we do with our life here has some positive or negative effect and art is a very positive way to look at yourself and to touch your spirit. It is very important that people in society know that these people have something to offer, that they are not all bad, that there is another side, that perhaps they may have to be always locked up, but they at least have a potential to put something into society that’s good (2010, p. 211).

Lynnelle expressed her own emotional struggles sharing art with her condemned students, “In my relationship with these men, they are warm, outgoing, light, appreciative, and loving people. On the other hand, there is the knowledge of what they have done. And I have never been able to resolve that. All I do is hold these truths in both hands and just look at both sides” (as cited by Tannenbaum, 2010, p. 210). From this paradox, I contend that the benefits of society in witnessing artwork created by people on death-row can be: 1) We might much better understand the implications of the death penalty. 2) We tell ourselves something about our society when we offer experience of art-making to those who are waiting to die. Are we a people who believe in acknowledging and reaching for the humanity in all people among us? 3) Given the racism of the criminal justice system in the United States, and the certain numbers of people wrongly convicted of death penalty offenses, perhaps it serves society well to be reminder of the people we have condemned to death. Might there have been a mistake somewhere?

#### 5.4.3 The contradiction between the language of art and that of prison

As noted early, there is always a paradox between prison language and art language. To work within prison one has to accommodate the two languages. This will never be emphasized sufficiently. Buzz Alexander summarizes elements essential for successful trouble shooting based on his experience in PCAP: Do “very good work from the beginning”, which will help “have a good record of responsibility and success” and create “allies”. Approach the staff with “respect, perspective, and generosity”. Approach them “as professionals” who understand “the reasons for policy”, “know the violence latent in prisons”, and may be “open to discussion” rather than “demons serving in an evil system”. “Gather the full story and all perspectives, and present a version that is neither belligerent nor arrogant, that both recognize the system language and convey the language from outside”. “Admit error”, “apologize”, “compromise”. “Recognize the enemy” who may destroy because they think “that is their job”, or because they believe the theory that “prisoners are scum, are dangerous, must be strictly controlled”, or other reasons. But then “continue to communicate with respect”, “seek the language and the entrance that will get the spot and enable an opening, a compromise”. But it does not always work, so it has to be very strategic (2010, p. 118-120).

#### 5.4.4 The risk of getting desensitized to reality

There is a tendency for people to get desensitized or traumatized after working for long time in the depressing and stressful environment in prison. Grady Hillman, who has worked in more than 50 correctional facilities within and outside the United States since 1981, said that it took him some time to “slough off” what he carried from prison, and he found he had “lost the sense of humor and became less attentive to family and friend life outside” (Brune, 2008, p. 80). After ten years of working in prison, Buzz Alexander sought therapy when his friends told him he was experiencing “secondary trauma” (Alexander, 2010, p. 196).

Even though these challenges addressed above are drawn from the practice of prison arts work in the United States, they fit in the context in China in general as well.

## 6. Recommendations

My research into prison arts in the United States has led me to appreciate their value: for incarcerated people, for the artists who work with them, and for society at large. Understanding the value as well as the paradoxes, complexities and challenges of prison arts in the United States, in this section, I will apply what I have learned to the context of prisons in China. This is a context I know well, because of the nine years I worked as an educator in the Chinese criminal justice system. I make recommendations in three directions: the first will focus on the response to crime in general, the second will point to the education within the police training academy, and the third direction will be centered on the inside world.

### 6.1 For the response to crime

Knowing that my Chinese fellows are immersed in a fantasy of America as it is a powerful force in economics, culture and politics throughout the world, my first suggestion will be a general and broad one: in terms of the response to crime, the U.S. model is definitely not the solution, and China should not copy and follow it. Marc Mauer wrote in the book *Race to Incarcerate*,

Whether imprisonment has worked to control crime is far from clear. Over the three-decade experience, increasing rates of incarceration have sometimes been accompanied by

rising crime and sometimes by falling crime. At best, world-record incarceration has had a modest and increasing diminishing, effect on crime rates (2006, p. 209).

I believe that it is significantly necessary for people in China to reflect on the root causes of crimes related to broad social problems and identify the short-term and long-term impacts of incarceration. In my view, our current policy orientation seems to focus more on a national, reactive reflex to crimes. I believe, instead, that we should seek to fight crime through preventive and constructive approaches. For instance, we can seek to strengthen the community, improve the quality of education, make sure education is accessible to everyone, diminish the distribution disparity, and provide more effective transitional service for people after release from periods of incarceration.

## **6.2 For the education of future prison staff**

Despite the very different cultural and social contexts between China and the United States, there are similar misbeliefs and stereotypes about prison and people in prison and post release, and similar widely existing ethical indifference to the sufferings of others. I remember clearly that a few years ago when I finished telling a story of an incarcerated woman in class, I asked my students “Why is she poor?” One of my students stood up and asked back, “Why should I care? I am from the upper or middle class, and my job will be to keep prisoners inside and guarantee the security.” Honestly, I did not know what to say at that moment. Since then, I kept asking myself what my student had asked me and why my student did not care. I realize that for an educator it is more important to help students to care about the reality and the suffering of others than to teach specific knowledge and skills. Today these questions are still haunting my mind, which keeps me awake as an educator reflecting on what is missing in our education system.

Now, combining my own experience of exploring arts in the United States, I make recommendations below as a response to the experience mentioned above:

### **6.2.1 Apply the story-circle approach**

Given the fact that the physical arrangement of classrooms where I used to work is the conventional form with rows of desks and chairs facing the front separating the educator and students, I suggest it be rearranged into a circle in which everyone can have his/her voice. In this way, the classroom can be used to practice democracy in our daily life experience.

During my time at Brandeis University, I have realized that somehow much education (both in China and in the United States) is far from life, and knowledge is mistakenly deemed to be more important than life itself. I think if education finds little connection to life, it might actually lead to an indifference to reality. I strongly advise that education start from sharing stories of students’ life experience, and their response to others. In this way, education can touch the ground of life, descending from its lofty (and generally disconnected) focus on theory and instruction.

### **6.2.2 Incorporate arts into the curriculum system for future prison staff**

Based on my exploration of arts such as drawing, theatre and collage making, I realize that compared to rationality and logic, art, as an aesthetic practice, is a different way of learning and understanding world and life. Learning is not only intellectual, but also can include movement, music, visual art, performance as well as cognitive work. Engaging in arts can help a person

develop mentally, physically, and spiritually into a whole human being, which words alone cannot achieve, certainly not for all learners. Knowing that in the Chinese education system, art has been historically marginalized, and usually only students majoring in arts have access to them, I propose that arts be incorporated into the curriculum system in educating young men and women who will staff in prison. I believe that engaging with art will nourish them and help them resist the military hierarchy within the prisons that someday they may work in. The capabilities nourished through engaging with the arts will help them to avoid getting hardened or retaliating.

### 6.2.3 Expand collaborative games in classes

Considering the fact that within the whole Chinese culture people are encouraged to pursue individual success and that people do not have strong connection to each other, I recommend that collaborative exercises be expanded in classes. These exercises can be designed to help students navigate the tension between their individual interests and the greater goal of the team. They might emphasize the principles of selflessness and compassion in the surrender of the individual's interest to the greater goal of the team. They might help students build groups that support each individual's expression and leadership, focusing on sense of community and interdependence.

### 6.2.4 Engage students in working with people after release and children whose parents are incarcerated

Allowing for the students' lack of awareness of reality and of the suffering from others, I contend that they engage in the work with people after release and children whose parents are incarcerated.

By becoming involved in helping people deal with many challenges after their release and children with parents incarcerated, students will know the widely existing stigma of incarceration and the impact of incarceration on the incarcerated and their family, which will in turn improve their understanding of their work. Also, these services might in fact prevent re-offending crimes.

## **6.3 For people both inside and outside**

Since the public has not paid much attention to the world of prison life, it is crucial to take actions to break the barrier and build a bridge between inside and outside. It will help the public to de-demonize prison and people incarcerated, raise their awareness of the issue on incarceration, pose challenges for prison system to reform and lead change from outside. Here I have a few suggestions as follows:

### 6.3.1 Engage students in helping prisoners improve writing

In China, some literate prisoners write essays, and then submit them to periodicals or newspapers circulating within the prison system. If the essays are accepted, they will attain grades which can be added to their overall performance record used as a criterion for commuting sentence. One thing I recommend is that students help prisoners to work on their writing, which can build a bridge between them and promote growth for both.

### 6.3.2 Find a public space in the outside world for the writings by people inside

Since the writings by prisoners in China only circulate within the criminal justice system itself and have not entered the public field, I recommend that we make an effort to let the works by people incarcerated go outside and confront the public, which will help the voice from the inside be heard, thus in turn afford the public an access to the inside world, challenge the prejudices they have and break the barrier between the inside and outside.

### 6.3.3 Bring more arts into prison

In China, the prison system encourages families, local governments, scholars and any other forces to support the rehabilitation of prisoners, which is a positive signal for artists to work inside. With a deep belief in the transformative power of arts noted earlier and a full recognition of the desperate needs for expression from the incarcerated, here I share a vision that more and more people inside can have more access to a variety of arts, which will definitely offer possibilities for change, healing, humanity and growth in a deprived and restrictive environment. This is a way for the incarcerated to be transformed constructively, develop into full human beings and live richly and meaningfully. Benefits will come not only to incarcerated people, but to the society as a whole.

## **7. Concluding statement**

In conclusion, I believe there is an urgent need for scholars, artists, educators and criminal authorities to critically think about the reality of the criminal justice system and work jointly both inside and outside the criminal justice system to dispel the misbeliefs about prison and the incarcerated, recognize the humanity and dignity of people inside as human beings, and improve conditions so they can development themselves more fully. Although this will be a long and challenging path, it is one that I am prepared to pursue. I see no other way out.

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