Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

January 24, 2025

Chairman David M. Rubenstein
President Deborah F. Rutter
John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts
Washington, DC 20566

Dear Mr. Rubenstein and Ms. Rutter:

We are writing regarding the upcoming performance "Chinese New Year (A Ballet in Two Acts)" by the National Ballet of China, which is currently scheduled to be performed at the Kennedy Center from January 29 to February 2, 2025. While we pass no judgment on the artistic merits of the ballet and as a general matter strongly support free artistic expression, we do want to call to your attention—and the attention of your patrons—that there is no free artistic expression in the People's Republic of China (PRC) and that the National Ballet of China is controlled by Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Moreover, while presenting a friendly façade to the American public via the ballet, this regime is actively persecuting writers, artists and other creative talents who dissent from the Party line not only within the PRC, but also abroad, including in the United States. We therefore ask that you respond to our questions below.

Among the National Ballet's five leadership figures, three are Communist Party members, and director Feng Ying has held official posts, including in the National People's Congress—whose members are handpicked by the Party—and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference. Institutionally, the National Ballet of China has embedded in it a Party Committee Office that is responsible for ensuring compliance with Party directives. Hence, the National Ballet of China clearly is part of the CCP's political machinery.

Art is a political instrument in the PRC, used for the purpose of disseminating propaganda abroad and mobilizing the masses domestically. In the words of CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping, "creative art and culture is to be written in the history of national rejuvenation and the journey of the people's struggle," which is part of the CCP's political aspiration of augmenting China's international influence, underpinned by Communist ideology. In the current political

environment in China, art is tasked with resisting ideas inconsistent with those of the Party and with rejecting universal values.[1] This is consonant with Party policy outlined in a 2013 document known as Communiqué on the Current State of the Ideological Sphere—or, less formally, Document No. 9—the preeminence of which is roughly concurrent with the rise of Xi Jinping.

We note that the Kennedy Center is a public building and a memorial to President John F. Kennedy, who believed that dancers, poets, musicians, writers and painters are critical participants in a vibrant American democracy.

But art is propaganda in Xi Jinping's China and can only serve the CCP. Though the Kennedy Center performances are generally privately funded, Congress appropriated $44 million in FY2024 budget to maintain the Kennedy Center as a public building, and we believe there is a responsibility to be accountable to the U.S. taxpayers for what goes on in their building. Subsidizing CCP propaganda and implicitly endorsing Xi Jinping's war on artists and intellectuals—see attached appendix for more details—is not responsible stewardship in our opinion. And we have questions about the purpose of this performance and its intent.

Given the foregoing, we have some questions for you which we hope can be answered by no later than January 28, 2025:

- Will any United States government appropriated money be used to stage the National Ballet's performances, if so, how much and on what will that money be spent?
- Who are the funders of the National Ballet performance and is any of the funding coming from the PRC government, "national champion" corporations in China, or government entities such as the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (CPAFFC) or similar United Front Works Department (UFWD) entities? (The UWFD is responsible for the persecution of American citizens and residents and artists abroad, some of whom are mentioned in the Appendix.)
- Will the Kennedy Center return funding received from any of the entities listed above?

[1] See, e.g., "Whom to Serve? How the CCP Censors Art in Europe," *Index on Censorship*, November 2022, https://perma.cc/6URB-7BNE; "党领导文艺工作的发展脉络与历史经验" [Sequence of events in the development and historical experience of art and culture work under the Party's leadership], *People's Tribune*, May 20, 2022, https://perma.cc/NP63-TLKY.

- Will the Kennedy Center include any contributions made by the PRC or entities associated with the CPP or other foreign adversaries in its FY2026 budget justification to Congress?
- Has the Kennedy Center had any conversations that would condition the National Ballet of China performances upon release of imprisoned Chinese artists, including those listed in the Appendix?
- Will the Kennedy Center call attention to specific cases of artistic suppression and the CCP's efforts to push propaganda abroad in places visible to people attending the National Ballet of China performance, such as in *Playbill* or in displaying the art of imprisoned artists in the Kennedy Center?
- Will the Kennedy Center's leadership meet with Chinese dissidents living in the U.S., whose loved ones are arbitrarily detained and even tortured in PRC prisons for exercising rights we take for granted in America?
- If the Kennedy Center is unwilling to take such steps, should performances by the National Ballet of China be considered a propaganda subsidy for the CCP, and if so, will the Kennedy Center take the uncomfortable step of severing ties with the National Ballet of China?

We ask that you respond to our inquiries as soon as possible, as the National Ballet's shows are scheduled to begin on January 29, 2025. Should it be helpful, we are able to provide experts who can provide you with information on the CCP's abuses against free expression and artistic freedom and its efforts to silence dissenting voices in the United States through transnational repression.

Thank you.

Christopher Smith
Member of Congress

John Moolenaar
Member of Congress

APPENDIX—Targeted Artists

- Songwriter **Liu Sifang** and lyricist **Xu Lin** were criminally detained for "picking quarrels and provoking trouble" in September 2017 in connection with their songs promoting democracy and human rights. After completing three years of imprisonment, Xu was detained again in May 2024 on the same charge related to his online political speech.
- Sculptors **Gao Shen** and **Gao Qiang** were detained in August 2024 by police in Hebei province on the charge of "insulting or slandering heroes and martyrs," reportedly in connection with their artworks, including those around the theme of reassessing Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution.
- **Li Xuehui** was criminally detained in October 2024 by police in Beijing for "picking quarrels and provoking trouble" in connection with a series of performance art videos critical of government policies.
- U.S.-based sculptor **Chen Weiming** was harassed and had his political artwork vandalized *in the United States* in 2021 by people whom the FBI identified as agents of the CCP.
- **Jens Galschiøt's** sculpture "Pillar of Shame" commemorating the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre was removed by Hong Kong police and was later seized on national security grounds.
- The Australia-based **Badiucao**, produced posters critical of the 2022 Beijing Olympics and called attention to the PRC's human rights violations. The posters that were displayed on George Washington University campus became the subject of an investigation ordered by the university president in response to complaints filed by pro-CCP student groups. The university president later walked back his decision in light of widespread criticism of his acquiescence to a CCP censorship initiative, including from U.S. lawmakers.
- **Chen Pinlin** is a documentary filmmaker who was sentenced to three years and six months in prison by a court in Shanghai in connection with a documentary titled "Urumqi Middle Road," which showed protests in 2022 against the PRC government's harsh "zero-COVID" policy.