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Post-Cultural Revolution Beijing: Making a Space for Today

This paper explores how poets used city spaces of Beijing in the late 1970s as a tactic in literary production and circulation at a time when conventional means were ~~essentially~~ ~~inaccessible~~ to independent artists. In the process of transforming city spaces ~~as a kind of~~ ~~space~~ ~~making~~ ~~do with~~ extreme limitations, the writers ~~created~~ ~~a~~ ~~poly~~ ~~vocal~~ challenge to the monolingual, official narrative of modern China during the reign of the Gang of Four. The paper follows the stream of signification that flows from ~~single~~ ~~poem~~ to its publication in an unofficial journal, and finally to where the unofficial journal was circulated at the Democracy Wall in the Xidan ~~district~~ of Beijing. The interventions that ~~took~~ ~~place~~ during the “Spring of Beijing” in the late 1970s demonstrate the rhetorical potential of spatial practice within the city for ~~re~~ ~~imagining~~ the nation and challenging official discourse.

A lot can be written about the poetry, the poets, and the journals of the period between 1978 and 1980. Many writers remained unknown and many of the poems and articles have lost their place in the cultural memory of Beijing. ~~Of~~ ~~the~~ ~~players~~ ~~involved~~

This paper employs the Pinyin system for Romanizing Chinese words.

of power to local agents from a central authority. The narrator rhetorically establishes “The age without heroes” as the retrograde age of the present, which is intimately related to the tension between death and becoming “man,” as seen in the final “final hour.” prophetic announcement is muted by the “maybe” correspondingly the aspirations of the speaker are muted by his or her historical moment. As a result, the poem produces an elegiac tone through the construction of a non-accessible past, which corresponds reflectively, to literature. During the May Fourth Movement and later, during the Communist Revolution, literature was considered an important tool in heroic projects of modernization.³ Bei Dao’s poem can be read as an oblique political critique, which not only suggests that a previous heroic age dissolved into the chaos of the Cultural Revolution during the rule of the Gang of Four, but also that poetry can no longer have the heroic and historic function of modernizing the nation state. Embedded in the poem is a politics of subjectivity that Bei Dao creates by juxtaposing the “I” with the collective and monumentalizing task of forging heroes. Bei Dao’s invocation of the “I” runs counter to the ideological demands for intensive collectivization of the period’s propaganda. In the late 1970s the newspapers carried several warnings against decadent bourgeois individualism, for example:

The whole party, the whole country, the whole people must have a revolutionary spirit of “he who does not work to accomplish the four modernizations is not a good citizen,” must work energetically, courageously exert himself, and forget himself in his work.⁴

This author’s call for intensive collectivization toward Zhou Enlai’s “four modernizations” proposes

from the official media, which in turn casts doubt upon the use of coercive
 antisestablishmentarian totalizingpropaganda as a mode of literary discourse.
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 Chow indicates this problem in an article on trends in post-Cultural Revolution Chinese
 pop culture: “the coercive regimentation of emotions that is carried out under the massive
 collectivization of human lives...is what produces the deepest alienation ever, because it
 turns human labor into the useful job that we are performing for that ‘other’ known as the
 collective, the country, the people.” In Bei Dao’s “Declaration,” the poetic subject
 attempts to reconcile alienation not from what is heroic, but what is human, producing a
 dramatic tension through insistence on the subjective.” Within the poem, the

and the tremendous and difficult task of reflecting the spirit of the new era has already fallen on our generation's shoulders.¹⁰

The title, "Today," like the refusal to write in Bei Dao's poem complicates official

historical significance by intervening with an alternative narrative of the 1970s

national humiliation brought about the KMT's National Humiliation Day, which was celebrated on May 9th 1917 to foster national pride and indignation toward Japanese colonial attitudes.²² Cohen presents different advertisements, such as on cigarette packets, to show how the discourse of humiliation had permeated material culture, bidding the consumer not to forget "National Humiliation Day."²³ It is interesting that cigarette packets became one of the chief places for advertisements of this kind, because tobacco became a substitute for opium.

Taking the events of the Opium War as a humiliation that sparked the beginning of modernization, the connection between humiliation and development (social evolution) become an important tactical f2 aJ4(k2)-1(a)4(c)6(t3(m8n)2(imp)2.r T2(pi)-2(um)-10(e)4(Or6(t3(m

5th (an inversion of Mayday) Qing Ming festival of 1976. On April 4th a large crowd of mourners gathered to commemorate Zhou Enlai, laying wreaths and dedication poems in Tiananmen Square. By evening local security guards had rid the square of these ceremonial and symbolic trappings.³² The next day, protestors arrived at the square with new wreaths and poems. Goodman describes the scene as follows

Authors were hoisted on high to declaim their poems, eulogies of Zhou, or condemnations of Jiang Qing et al. The crowd rushed the Great Hall of the People (to the west of the Square), overturned several official vehicles and set them on fire, and sacked a public security office in the south east corner of Tiananmen Square. Eventually, after nightfall, the public security forces were sent in to break up the crowd.³³

After the event, the Gang of Four acted quickly, removing Deng Xiaoping from his post. On the streets, many participants were arrested, and according to one investigation were up to four hundred executions.³⁴ However, with the portentous date, April 4th, coupled with a politically charged literary production, writers and activists had begun to think of the event as having a radical potential for political, if not social, transformation.

Poetry in China has had a long history of political uses. The civil servant's examination system tested poetic competence. Chinese literary history is full of poets who served in government posts who wrote poetry critical of government policy. China's first canonized poet, the statesman Qu Yuan, whose suicide was a political act, wrote famous poetic calls for reform; he is remembered to this day with the Dragon Boat Festival. In the late Qing dynasty, Qiu Jin wrote politically motivated poetry before her execution. As mentioned before, May Day poetry of the early Republican government was not only politically motivated, it was thought to have properties of social transformation. Mao Zedong wrote poetry that was classical

modes into revolutionary romanticism. It is not surprising then that during the April 5th protest, poetry was tactfully deployed. Politically speaking, Zhou Enlai's mourners used poetry as one of the first public gestures of defiance against the Mao Zedong. The protesters employed a performative and spontaneous use of poetry that functioned within a discourse of the nation. At the same time, poetry functioned as a public expression of personal mourning. Indeed the spectacle of mourning touched a community not only of writers but of readers, as many people copied these poems and distributed them. The poems circulated around the country to far away cities, like Guangdong and Chengdu. Poets like Bei Dao who "had first come to fame with his poem, "The Answer" (《回答》), became widely known through these unofficial channels of communication.³⁵ Ultimately, the events of April 5th led to the beginning of the Xidan democracy wall, and the birth of Jintian.

The poems and protest slogans during the April Fifth incident appeared as a *da zi bao* (大字报, 54 big character posters), *ti bi shi* (题词, inscribed poems), and mimeographed copies.³⁶ Such a practice of copying and disseminating slogans and text opened up a possibility for the use of the press for writings other than political tracts. Goodman discusses tactics of the different factions of the Red Guard during the Cultural Revolution as having an influence on not only the April Fifth incident, but on the "unofficial" print industry, because they "had access to both printing and duplicating facilities.³⁷ Furthermore, the use of *da zi bao* mimicked the effective and cheap practice that the government used for posting official propaganda. Two years after the April Fifth incident, starting in 1978 and continuing until 1980, Xidan became the site for the posting of many

da zì bao poems that were organized by groups of “intellectuals and young students.”³⁸ After the different groups began to “unofficially” collect and publish essays and poetry that had been posted on the walls into journals, people would come to read, copy, and purchase editions of the various journals at the wall. As Hung Hsin describes, the members of the journal would meet at the wall and hold readings and discussions with the crowds that would gather there.³⁹ Hung Hsin observed the print capital enterprise at the Xidan democracy wall that grew out of the 1976 April Fifth incident, identifying and describing over ten journals that “published” at the wall in 1979, the most notable being Jintian, Beijing Zhì Chun (Beijing Spring), Siwu Luntan (April Fifth Forum), Tansuo (Exploration).

texts. Bei Dao tells of this literary environment in relation to the poetry of the Jiuye Group:

Due to the fact that this series had a restricted publication limited to areas around

undesirable books traveled without need of legs, undesirable songs flew without wings, card playing became the major cultural recreation, and the bourgeois living pattern and feudalist habits and traditions spread extensively.⁴³

One problem that this official monologism created was the division and multiplicity that arose out of a national discourse that confused existing political lines. Were the Red Guard rear-guardaries maintaining continuous revolution, thereby thwarting the possibility of realizing, as we have seen Duara point out, the termination of the revolution—the end of “History”? Were the supporters of economic development and “opening up to the West” radicals putting the revolution on hold by developing this r(OtdD6i)-4.99 0ehse

Dao related some of the anxiety that the writers had during the first postings, because they feared they would be arrested.⁴⁷ Nobody knew how the officials would react. He also said that one of the ways that the poetry was allowed to exist was that officials did not think that the poems were “Chinese,” but were obscure reproductions of European modernism. The extent to which the Jintian writers were outside the official guidelines was realized in August 1980 when not only much of the poetry had been criticized as decadent, Western, and elitist, but also local officials “ordered *Today* to stop publication, under the pretext that *Today* had not registered before.”⁴⁸

Time, Progress, Revolution and Imaginary Cities

In addition to the clock, the city stands for another side gauge of time in post-Cultural Revolution China. Between being torn down and completely rebuilt, the physical layout of the city is a discourse of modernization and development to the extent that the post-Cultural Revolution city is symptomatic of geographic amnesia—a tactic used during the Cultural Revolution to reify revolutionary consciousness. Physically speaking, the moments are constructed by the interval of completely forgetting where entire sets of spaces have been appropriated and exchanged through massive demolition and construction projects including everything from highways to universities. The “museum” spaces like temples and famous walls that remain also change memory via extreme architectural juxtaposition with postmodern, perhaps even post-postmodern structures.

development model of historiography, this time would be ticking through modernization towards a moment when the city would stop ticking at the end of history, and an end to demolition, and construction. This would be a course following a teleological and evolutionary design that is designated by history. But the rhetoric itself that went into the production and dissemination of this historiography is based on a condition of modernity looking to forget a former condition and replace it with what will make remembering former conditions impossible. For example, Deng Xiaoping's policy of opening and reform as well as foreign investment has changed architectural relations within the nomos of China. In the past twenty years development organizations from all over the world have flocked to China and offer everything from teaching English as a foreign language (Peace Corps) to hydroelectric projects (like the ones that took place in Panzhihua) have reinforced this rhetoric of development from Party leaders who look towards

this disappearing act, not only do the changing lines remove what was there before, but they also remove apparatuses that were previously employed for discursive purposes. This is to say the material conditions of the city around 1979 allowed for certain practices that made it possible to use a wall and poetry as communal print capital that subverted official discourse and cleared out a space for critique. It was in this space that a community of writers had appropriated the city from a discourse of modernization for a future into a present; in doing so they transformed the meaning of the wall (to divide, to separate, to obstruct) into a window for looking into the community's thoughts and ideas, which brought people together. The poetry that was first pasted on the city wall, then copied and put into a journal, later anthologized, translated, and circulated around the world, is a stubborn trace of the local history of the Xidan district. Unfortunately, it is a confusing and deceitful trace appearing in different dress and packaged for a different purpose than the voice in the crowd or the voice on the wall as it was in 1979.

Using the city as a determining figure might be a way of placing Bei Dao, Jintian, and the Democracy M

juxtaposition of different modes of production in fact seems to be precisely what Fredric Jameson thinks to be the typical condition of possibility for the emergence of a modernist aesthetics and politics in turn-of-the-century Europe⁵⁰ He continues:

[B]y means of a resituated recycling, residual modernists show an even firmer grasp of the enduring dilemmas and contradictions that underlie the condition of modernity. They also succeed in retroactively revealing that European modernism itself was a discourse of residuality in the first place. In other words, Modernism became an available ideology precisely at the moment when capitalist experience in Europe was fraught with residual forms and possibilities (even the Future uncannily appeared reminiscent of a past imagination⁵¹).

Though the menglong poets in Jintian claimed to be looking for a new aesthetic with which to create Chinese poetry, they also sought new possibilities within the framework of the “official” historiography. Throughout this project many of the poets were criticized, for example Ai Qing, a poet who gained his fame before 1949 and by 1979 assumed a weighty stature, said of the menglong poets, “Poems cannot be evaluated as good or bad unless they are understandable in the first place. The incomprehensibility of some poems results from their mechanical imitation of Western poetry.”⁵² Ai Qing’s criticism of menglong poetry can be compared to critiques of Tagore’s poetry by Indian critics, revealing a sharp anxiety over the conflicts between tradition and modernity. In Provincializing Europe, Chakrabarty defines literary modernism as a relation between the poet and the modern cosmopolitan city.⁵³ Chakrabarty quotes an Indian critic who criticized Tagore: “I did not spare any opportunity to spread the word that not only was Rabindranath inferior to Western poets, but that he was also a successful imitation of them.”⁵⁴ The critic clearly depends on a cosmopolitan milieu to frame his comments even though Tagore, like the menglong poets, is writing in a different context than

The community formed by the production of poetry has, in essence, been fractured by subsequent historical events and they have become subjects of history. A residual effect of the events of June 4th 1989 when the tanks rolled into Tiananmen. Bei Dao has taken a post at the University of California at Berkeley and has become something of an embarrassment to the developed coastal Chinese elites, who see him as diminishing the image of “modern” post-Cultural Revolution China. They have good reason; his presence is a reminder of the events immediately at the end of the Cultural Revolution, which have been turned into an example of “backwardness” in Mainland Chinese histories. It has created another case of tactical remembering and forgetting as a way of dealing with another “humiliation.” The Tiananmen event was intimately related to the historiography of development. The fact that the protests occurred within a space of the city that figures as a “museum” piece, in addition to the violence that took place in many ways left the poetry of Jintian dissociated from its April 5th 1976 context, and forced in the context of June 5th 1989. Both inside and outside China, critics have made the June 4th incident a comment on China’s stage of development. A verdict that says that in 1989 China was “not there yet.”

The small fragments, the poems of Jintian have also been criticized as “not there yet” in terms of a “developed” national poetry, but simply imitations of the Western Modernism. Meanwhile, the poets themselves were weary of existing as heroic tools of national destiny. Gu Cheng, whose menglong poetry appeared in Jintian poems that defer the labor of heroic national destiny and suggest, instead, silence:

Just tiny flowers,
weak and slender leaves,

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³² Goodman, 31.

³³ Ibid., 32.

³⁴ Ibid., 32.

³⁵ Bei Dao, "Translation Style: A Quiet Revolution" in Wendy Larson, ed. *Inside Out: Modernism and PostModernism in Chinese Literary Culture* (Oxford: Alden Press, 1993), 233

³⁶ Goodman, 38.

³⁷ Ibid., 38.

³⁸ Chen, 89.

³⁹ Hung Hsin, "Peking's People" in *run publication* (Cheng Ming) 19, March 79), trans. Joint Publications Research Service: Translations on PRC #522 (May 1979) 22.

⁴⁰ Hung Hsin, 22.

⁴¹ Bei Dao, "Translation Style: A Quiet Revolution" 64.

⁴² Michel Foucault, "Space Power and Knowledge" in Simon Daring, ed. *The Cultural Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge 2000) 80. File name: C:\548.9256 (5r-16)Tj-0.006 Tj(0)09Ttw0125p(1-1)-23E(1)08(10)402(2)