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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 inaccessible to independent artists. In the process of transforming city spaces and 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 a 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.

with the Democracy Wall movement, perhaps the most famous figure to emerge is the internationally acclaimed poet Bei Dao. Bei Dao's poetry is emblematic of the artistic interventions that were mobilized in the late 1970s not only as a result of his poems like "The Answer" (回答), but also from his poems that incorporate silence.

In one of Bei Dao's early poems, "Declaration," ("宣告"), we find a tactical use of silence. This poem shows how silence can be used in a battle between official history and repressed histories. The narrative voice of the poem is one that chooses silence:

Perhaps the final hour is come	也许最后的时刻到了
I have left no testament	我没有留下遗嘱
Only a pen, for my mother	只留下笔，给我的母亲
I am no hero	我并不是英雄
In an age without heroes	在没有英雄的年代里，
I just want to be a man. ¹	我只想做一个人。

"Declaration" provides a representative example of the kinds of poems published in *Jintian*, as well as the issues related to language and historiography the avant-garde artists were dealing with after the Cultural Revolution.² The poem represents the kinds of challenges to official history evident in the very name of the journal, *Jintian* (今天), which means "today."

Bei Dao's poem presents a historiography of cultural devolution from a time of "heroes" to a time of the less than human (in the poem Bei Dao uses the character *ren*(人), which is not gendered and more accurately translated as "person"). The poem glosses the concept of devolution, meaning both *fin de siècle* degeneration, as well as the delegation

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.” The 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 now-inaccessible past, which corresponds, self-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 has devolved 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 towards Zhou Enlai’s “four modernizations” proposes that the individual must be lost in the heroic task of development.⁵ Bei Dao’s poem questions these perpetual, mass appeals for solidarity

from the official media, which in turn casts doubt upon the use of coercive antidisestablishmentarian and totalizing propaganda as a mode of literary discourse. Rey 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.”⁶ 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 an insistence on the subjective “I.” Within the poem, the emblematic (if not ironic) refusal of the “I” to write, coupled with the desire to assert an individual human consciousness, challenges the official demand that literature reify class and revolutionary consciousness. It must be remembered, too, that at this time Chairman Mao’s proscriptive Yan’an address on literature still governed the content and style of literary production, such that literature had to function as an ideological tool for the revolution.⁷

The way history is presented in the poem, however, involves a more complex and coded politics than the politics of subjectivity, or even a denunciation of the restriction on literature during the Cultural Revolution. Criticism of the Gang of Four and the Cultural Revolution would not even have been very radical. Condemning the Gang of Four for “sabotaging the nation” was a part of Deng Xiaoping’s official policy.⁸ Bei Dao’s concern has less to do with the historical events of the time than with its dominant historiography. He states there is “no testament / Only a pen” (lines 2-3), the historical document is never recorded. The ambiguous artifact remains in the form of the pen—Bei

Dao plays on the signification of the pen's failed purpose, which is to create the signifier. The pen tactfully and densely combines the signifier, signified, and the technology of signification with cutting irony, because the tool that does the inscribing to create meaning must have meaning inscribed upon it, either as a symbol or as an artifact. This meaning only comes with the historical event—"final hour," signifying an ending. But it only stops for the individual, because the event, presumably death, would not stop the history of the pen after the mother receives it (line 3). The agent that gives meaning is not the narrator but a condition of history that, instead of progressing, regresses into death. Bei Dao, then, turns the official ideology of progress on its head. In doing so the poetic speaker creates an ironic tension between the individual and a historical "age" that mirrors the individual's life and the constant tension with death. This certainty of death, ultimately, grounds the teleological world view. Bei Dao implies through the failed pen that there is an unrecorded history that somehow is involved with being human—a subjective, interior history not privy to the nation—a silent history. Therefore, his "declaration" remains unwritten because the official language of the state that creates heroes cannot create human beings.

"Declaration" first appeared in the unofficial journal, *Jintian* (今天*Today*). The journal was lithographed using government equipment and the copies were posted and distributed around Beijing, primarily at the Xidan Democracy Wall.⁹ Like Bei Dao's poem, the title of the journal marks an attempt to rethink official historiography. In the first issue the editors, of whom Bei Dao was a member, stated:

Our country's cultural history since "May 4th" has been founded on these [literary] achievements. But now, speaking of them as a generation, they have fallen behind,

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 signification by intervening with an alternative narrative of history. In this narrative, the utopian revolutionary horizon is replaced by one of immediate crisis. Just as the power of the poet's "declaration" comes from the eschatological moment of the "final hour," the title of the journal, "Today," suggests immediacy. Yet, the publication, "Today," strives for a substantial intervention in Chinese cultural production—a day like May 4, 1919, which became the May Fourth Movement. It is interesting to note that the English translated title on the first edition of *Jintian* was "The Moment,"¹¹ which intensifies the historical problem of "today," by representing its contents as pieces of temporal fragmentation. This is a typically modernist problem of expressing a disjuncture between the artist's historical moment and the dominant cultural production, which the artist perceives as devolved. The journal, *Today*, introduces the lament of Joyce, "History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake."¹² Just as Bei Dao's poem attempts the act of de-politicizing a political act ("Declaration"), the name of the journal in which it appears, *Jintian*, marks de-historicized time.

Bei Dao and the other poets who wrote under the banner of *Jintian* represent a great challenge to the official state historiography. One obvious model of official historiography is derived from the Chinese Communist Party's appropriation of Marxist doctrine. The other teleological model, as identified by Prasenjit Duara in his *Rescuing History from the Nation*, stems from a variety of social Darwinism that circulated among Chinese thinkers at the beginning of the twentieth century.¹³ Duara shows how "race,

nation, and History” went into the formation of a “Historical subject” through the following equation:

An agent constituted by a homogeneous community (race) within a territorial state (nation) that had evolved into the present so that it was now poised to launch into a modern future (History) of rationality and self-consciousness in which contingency of history itself would be eliminated (end of History).¹⁴

From such an ideology of social evolution that took place shortly after the Chinese Republican Revolution it becomes easy to see how the Marxist model of history superimposed on top of this discourse would re-inscribe an ideology of development through nation, race, and history.

During the May Fourth Movement, intellectuals worked to modernize China through historical, literary, and philological efforts, which largely were engaged in opposing Classical Chinese and insisting upon a vernacular literature. For China, models for this new May Fourth literature came from contact zones, particularly Japan, which opened up an encounter between Chinese intellectuals with European nineteenth-century philosophers and writers of realist fiction. This was a transforming moment in Chinese modernism that opened up a literary and philosophical renaissance where people like Hu Shi and Lu Xun were rethinking expressions of Chinese narrative and history.¹⁵ It was also the time when Wang Jinwei wrote his seminal tract on Chinese nationalism.¹⁶ Duara describes this article, a matrix of ethnic evolution and national development, as a “creative application of the lessons of social Darwinism.”¹⁷ Wang’s 1905 essay became the groundwork for an ideology that competing intellectual elites used to encourage nationalism and modernization, while at the same time repressing different histories to achieve a modern Chinese nation state, and an “end of history.”¹⁸

Humiliation, Nationalism, History

Wang's appropriation of social Darwinism constructs the modern Chinese nation through an ontology that follows an evolutionary trajectory. For this, the tactical use of humiliation by the regime in power allows for a construction of a point *alpha* from which to evolve. This way the nation has a fix that can be used to gauge its course, navigating a trajectory of evolution. In his article, "Remembering and Forgetting," Paul Cohen writes about the relation between nationalism, modernization, and humiliation in China. In 1915 after occupying Korea, and testing the vulnerability of China's recently established Republican government (KMT), Japan issued "21 demands," which ultimately demanded that the KMT relinquish China's sovereignty to Japan.¹⁹ This moment represents a repetition of "humiliation," which corresponds to China's violent introduction to modernity during the Opium War. Humiliation recapitulates a sense that "[t]here was an overriding emphasis on the shameful interlude of China's victimization at the hands of imperialism in the century following the Opium War."²⁰ These events became focal points for Chinese nationalism throughout the twentieth century.

Along the same lines, in 1979, the "remembering" of humiliations in official discourse follows Duara's observation of the ubiquity of social evolution as a governing ideology. For Example, Li Hongsheng's 1979 *Guandong Ribao* article summarizes a conference of historians who were outlining "China's Learning from the West;" in the article Li states that the historians identify the period from the end of the Opium War through to the 1870s as the time when pioneers first "perceived China's backwardness"²¹ beginning the "modern" age of China. This same perception of backwardness and

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 fulcrum for ideological leveraging that we see in comments in daily papers during 1979. Throughout the period ubiquitous expressions of progress as national destiny are found in official media: "This great historic change is necessitated by our nation's progress in social development. It is also the wish of our nation's great people and masses."²⁴ Benedict Anderson's investigation into Marxist states that engaged in open conflict with each other led him to explain ways in which countries, like China, were limited by the political structure of the modern nation state, keeping such countries from successfully achieving a fraternal order of governments formed by a proletariat revolution.²⁵ He saw their appropriation of the revolutionary political ideal as a kind of "piracy"—an appropriation to give the nation state a coherent narrative; he explains that there is no way to duplicate a theoretical vision into the actual conditions of the modern nation state, chiefly because the material conditions a Marxist nation state inherits involve the same "circuitry" as the regime it tries to replace; thus, political action is bound to maintain a coherent idea of the nation.²⁶ Compounding the problems facing

most revolutionary governments, the government that is replaced is often corrupt or inefficient, which is how a revolution would gain popular support in the first place. This was the case of the Guomindang (KMT) government after the 1911 revolution. It overtook the beleaguered and befuddled Qing dynasty, only to struggle with inadequate administration, a burden that the Communists faced after the 1949 liberation. As a result of the existing administrative infrastructure, the governments become an interpolation of the material realities and revolutionary ideals. However, the theoretical model of a populist Marxist revolution, or even bourgeois democratic revolutions, becomes an important tool for creating a narrative of the political and historical destiny that is coterminous with the nation state. In a sense, this is a trap that binds history to national ideological formations, such as social revolution, and represses other “histories” that do not fit into prescribed patterns. According to Anderson, the nation, like a novel, is a mapping of contiguous events that construct a narrative.²⁷

Anderson’s notion of the nation-state, and Cohen’s observations on a narrative of modernity that is constructed through humiliation—a collective effort to move from the time of national humiliation to a time of national greatness—combine to show how the ideology of progress and social evolution would become the overarching master-narratives of the modern Chinese nation state. The nation as a mode of historical progress exists at the expense of alternative, non-secular, non-Enlightenment modes of organizing communities. Thus, the poets of *Jintian*, represent a challenge to the narrative of the nation, not only because in their poetry they challenge the prevailing historiographies of progress, but also because the strategies they apply to their spatial practice opens up

possibilities for alternative interpolations between theoretical ideals and the existing material conditions.

From the Nation to the City: Time, Space, and Print Capital

Anderson shows how the nation is a construct formed by the intersection of two different planes: the material, and the temporal. Some of the material conditions that make nationalism a “cultural artifact”²⁸ include print capital,²⁹ as well as “the census, the map, and the museum.”³⁰ These aspects of material culture are cross-pollinated with a concept of time borrowed from Benjamin—“homogenous empty-time,” which is “measured by clock and calendar.”³¹ The combinations of these mechanizations form, to a large degree, the ability for people to imagine themselves as a community even though they have no direct ties, and have conflicting interests. This is a useful starting point for a discussion of the danger that *Jintian* posed to Chinese authorities—*Jintian* took advantage of an unconventional form of print capital to create the possibility for an intellectual community of readers, thinkers, and city dwellers, which was an alternative to the prescribed “imagined” community that Deng Xiaoping’s regime was constructing at the time.

The mainspring that *Jintian* used as print capital was the Xidan Democracy Wall, which is very different from the gears and meshes of the modern press. This situation came out of a unique set of circumstances that occurred with the death of Zhou Enlai and Mao Zedong, which ultimately ended the reign of the Gang of Four (Mao’s wife Jiang Qing, Zhang Chunqiao, Yao Wenyuan, and Wang Hongwen), and allowed the political resurgence of Deng Xiaoping. The roots of the Democracy Wall reach back to the April

5th (an inversion of May fourth) 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 Qiang 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 reacted quickly, removing Deng Xiaoping from his post. On the streets, many participants were arrested, and according to one investigation, there were up to four hundred executions.³⁴ However, with the portentous date, April Fifth, 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 exam of dynastic China's mandarin system tested poetic competence. Chinese literary history is full of poets who served in government posts yet who wrote poetry critical of government policy. China's first canonized poet, the statesman-poet 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 Fourth 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 fashioned 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 created 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 5th incident appeared as *da zi bao* (大字报 "big character posters"), *ti bi shi* (题壁诗 inscribed poems) and mimeographed copies.³⁶ Such a practice of copying and disseminating slogans and texts had 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 zi 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 Zhi Chun* (*Beijing Spring*), *Siwu Luntan* (*April Fifth Forum*), *Tansuo* (*Exploration*), and *Zhonghua Siwu* (*China April Fifth*). Hung also discusses the ways that the place had become an attraction for tourists who had begun to arrive in China through Deng Xiaoping’s open door, mainly because of Xidan’s proximity to Beijing’s cultural and historical monuments.⁴⁰ The small history of the Xidan Democracy Wall represents a literal discursive space between the marginal poets, thinkers, and street vendors, the centre of the Party’s seat of power, and, ultimately, the outside world. These groups, contiguous with each other in Beijing at the same time, were dealing with the same problems of representing China after the Cultural Revolution.

The political situation in China during the Cultural Revolution had created many unexpected literary affiliations. For example, there were many factions of the Red Guards, who consisted mostly of high school and university students, who confiscated censored materials but did not always secure these texts. This helped to create a black market in the circulation of censored or restricted material, which included translations of foreign

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 Beijing, it became a privileged, highly sought-after object in the cultural salons among the educated youth in Beijing.... [S]ome people started their creative writing prior to this, but their later development was more or less influenced by these books.⁴¹

One of the great failings of the monologic discourse established by Mao Zedong at the Yan'an conference of 1942, and even more intensely by the Gang of Four during the Cultural Revolution was the task of creating and perpetuating an ideologically pure language. The administrative infrastructure that the Communist Party took over had a long history; it was this very infrastructure that led to the corruption and ultimately the downfall of the Guomindang Party. In order to create revolutionary consciousness, the Communist Party was faced with a challenge of constructing not only new institutions but new paradigms through which these institutions could be understood. The effect of these efforts was to insist upon an ideologically pure language. Literary production had to conform to strict guidelines concerning content and form, resulting in repression, absurdity, and abuse. As Michel Foucault points out, however, "liberty is a *practice*."⁴² The practice of literary liberty during this time in China involved careful use of the ideologically "correct" official language, which originally was meant as a force of liberation but ultimately led to a confining "official-speak." However, unofficial literary production did exist, and it surfaced in unexpected ways. Li Honglin, writing for *Lishi Yanjiu (Historical Research)* in 1978 describes this situation: "As the Gang of Four destroyed the garden of 100 flowers, it became the paradise for poisonous weeds, thus

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 nationalist discourse that confused existing political lines. Were the Red Guard reactionaries maintaining continual revolution, thereby thwarting the possibility of realizing, as we have seen Duara point out, the destination of the revolution—the end of “History”? Were the supporters of economic development and “opening up to the West” radicals putting the revolution on track by developing the economic base? Li continues in the article saying: “All effects were the inevitable products of the Gang of Four’s line, which was ultra-left in appearance but ultra-right in substance. It was similar to going from Shanghai to New York: one could arrive from either east or west.”⁴⁴ Li’s playfully poignant use of “east” and “west” problematizes political demarcations, especially when put in the context of China’s entrance into modernity that came with the humiliations sustained at the hands of Western powers and Japan.⁴⁵

The Gang of Four’s limits on language and discourse pushed the contradictions of developmental modes of historiography to its limits. The result was the dispersion of ideologically “impure” texts, as well as the confusion on how to represent Chinese-ness in terms of the nation. The Democracy Movement was born of these questions and oppositions, as its supporters saw the official line of the Party as failing the people, as well as failing the historiography of development. On both levels, official and populist, the Cultural Revolution represented another case of “humiliation” that needed the

collective energies of the nation to correct it. Chen Fong-Ching, *et al.*, in *From Youthful Manuscripts to River Elegy*, trace the history of this movement only through the lenses of the ruling bureaucracy, which was going through massive changes after the third plenum of the Eleventh Party Congress. Deng Xiaoping was reinstated and began the process of “opening and reform,” reviving the four modernizations, normalizing relations with the United States, denouncing the past regime of the Gang of Four, and restoring general order after the Cultural Revolution.

On the streets, *Jintian* became the harbour that attracted the various drifting vessels of what became nebulously known as *menglong* or “misty” poets. These nomadic, and, in a couple of cases, crazy poets, who went to some of the nation’s best middle schools before the Cultural Revolution, self-consciously tried to restore the spirit of the May Fourth Movement, situating themselves in the same position as May Fourth writers such as Lu Xun and Hu Shi. Even though they had worked as construction workers and swineherds, they formed a literary elite, focusing on improving the stature of China’s literature. Thus, their “project” located itself in line with the official discourse of national development, but they also used the historiography as a place of critique and liberation from earlier modes of repression. The *Jintian menglong* poets, as did other writers of the Democracy Movement, appropriated official work-unit paper and typewriters, city walls, and a relaxation of government repression to produce their journal.⁴⁶ In other words they wrested the bureaucratic instruments of state administration away from official purposes and applied them for purposes of art and resistance. Or another way of looking at it is that they took the material conditions that went into the implementation of a dominant discourse and used them as a source of resistance. In an interview in March 2002, Bei

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 possible 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. The units of city time would be marked by a metrical deployment of China’s rhetoric of modernization. These changes in architecture reflect an inestimable change in the economic and social relations that these spaces dictate. Following the prevailing

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), and have reinforced this rhetoric of development. From Party leaders who look towards developing the superstructure for a future communist state, to the young executives of import and export companies who see the development of the economy as a step towards a better tomorrow for their children, the historiography is total in its promise for a prosperous future being made evident by pointy buildings and large TV screens outside department stores in shopping districts.

This "city time" is important because it is a structural forgetting of the Cultural Revolution-era city. In this sense we may read the modern Chinese city in terms of de Certeau: "The 'city' founded by utopian and urbanistic discourse is defined by the possibility of a threefold operation... the production of its own space... the substitution of nowhen... the creation of a universal and anonymous subject which is the city itself."⁴⁹ The changing city itself becomes a mode by which history disappears. Through

this disappearing act, not only do the changing lines remove what was there before, but they also remove apparatuses that were previously engaged 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 community-created 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 a 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 ink 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 Movement as modernist interventions. In 1979 China's economy was based on agriculture and industry, with rapidly changing modes of urban life. After the Cultural Revolution, the elites in urban centers were rethinking the relation between the revolution, development, and the nation. Tang Xiaobing names this moment in China's political and intellectual history as "residual modernism" in a gesture that bifurcates the totalizing label "modern." Thus, China's development is not contingent upon a European historiography of modern development, but relational to it in terms of material conditions, and the conditioning of over sixty years in which different European philosophies and literatures were internalized. For example, Tang Xiaobing states: "The unusual

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 Europe.”⁵⁰ 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 historical experience in Europe was fraught with residual forms and possibilities (even the Future uncannily appeared reminiscent of a past imagination).⁵¹

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 had 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 an unsuccessful imitation of them.”⁵⁴ The critic clearly depends on a cosmopolitan milieu to frame his comments, and even though Tagore, like the *menglong* poets, is writing in a different context than

“Western poets” the notion of following a “Western” aesthetic establishes a developmental narrative.

The critique of “imitation” is another form of the “humiliation” narrative, which positions the relationship between development, the modern, and the Western as fragments of the same Occidentalist discourse, suggesting that appropriations undermine a type of cultural purity. As such, appropriations, particularly “mechanical” or “unsuccessful” appropriations, represent another manifestation of a lack, which countries recovering from colonization face in the encounter with modernity. One of the points that Chakrabarty argues in *Provincializing Europe* through Tagore’s critique of “utilitarianism” and Tagore’s sense of nationalism is that it “created a [definition of the] political that resisted historicization.”⁵⁵ In this sense, Tagore is a residual modernist, whose poetry indicates an inherent heterogeneity that the project of nationalism brings. This then gives a sense of liberation, which is a practice of lyrical poetry’s inherent sense of freedom from print capital. Lyrical poetry does not necessarily require the same institutions of publication. A poem can circulate with breath and memory in a way that novels or newspapers cannot; it can be posted on walls and perform in a more communal way—from four letter word verse in toilet stalls, to recitations of the ballads of Qu Yuan in school rooms. As a fossil of an oral past, we see the urgency for official history to align it with modern discourse in a legitimizing act of a national poetry. By claiming the city’s walls as the site of textual circulation, Bei Dao and the poets of *Today* realized the rhetorical potential of the city spaces to become poetic spaces at a time when official literary magazines had kept poetry as a monologic enterprise of political reification which supported the government’s developmental historiography. In this sense, the politics of

Today, though the poets deny political motivations, were resistant to the “dominant historicization” by means of their residual modernism, that brought to life pre-Maoist modernist movements that had occurred in twentieth-century Chinese literature. This politics of historiography was enunciated through spatial practice in Beijing between 1978 and the early 1980.

Conclusion: Becoming A Subject of History

On November 30th 1979 Beijing officials met to close the Xidan democracy wall, responding with the following pronouncement:

Since the Gang of Four were smashed, our country has greatly needed a political environment of stability.... The people of the whole country are going all out to promote the four modernizations, while a small number of people with ulterior motives have made use of the “Xidan Wall” to stir up trouble and chaos everywhere so that people know no peace.... If we allow these people to go on making trouble, we will endanger the democracy of the masses and harm their fundamental interests.⁵⁶

By 1980 the government had begun to hassle the editors of *Jintian* about permits. The unofficial journal folded under the pressure.

The content of *Jintian* between 1979 and 1980 reflects the complexity of and the intense politicization that took place over the discourse of progress. The poems survive as fragments of the “unofficial” dialogic discourse, clearing out a space for critique. At the same time, these poets were intensely concerned with the national aesthetic, such that they reconstituted discourses of the nation. The historiography of development became both a tool of and an obstacle to the *Jintian* project, and negotiating such paradoxes the poets could best be described as residual modernists.

The community formed by the production of poetry has, in a sense, been fractured by subsequent historical events and by having 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 tarnishing 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 non-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, has in many ways left the poetry of *Jintian* dissociated from its April 5th 1976 context, and forced into the context of June 5th 1989. Both inside and outside China, historians have made the June 4th incident a comment on China’s stage of development with 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*, wrote poems that defer the labour of heroic national destiny and suggest, instead, silence:⁵⁷

Just tiny flowers,
weak and slender leaves,

它只有微小的花，
和瘦弱的叶片，

faint fragrances
lost in the fine spring air.

把淡淡的芬芳
溶进美好的春天。

My poems
like nameless little flowers
following the season's wind and rain,
bloom quietly in
the lonesome world

我的诗，
像无名的小花，
随着季节的风雨，
悄悄地开放在
寂寞的人间 (lines 9-17)*

This unassuming muted landscape written in 1971 has a simple, meditative cadence. Like Bei Dao's declaration, the namelessness of the flowers insists on the poet's individual subjectivity over the national heroic mission of poetry. The lyrics are as fragile and unassuming as a "declaration" unwritten. But Gu Cheng is more popularly remembered for his 1979 slogan-like couplet:⁵⁸

"A Generation"

“一代人“

The black night has given me two black eyes,
But I use them to look for light.

黑夜给了我黑色的眼睛，
我却用它寻找光明。*

Gu Cheng's compressed lyric, leaves us with the reminder that poetic participation in the national imaginary depends precisely on the vision of the poet. The poet who searches for light in the darkness is the poet who searches for an alternative to the totalizing forms of "national" language. Gu Cheng, like other poets of *Jintian*, suggests poetry offers one of the most radical and readily available spaces for alternative representations and

* My translation

alternative communities. In 1979 Beijing, for a brief moment, this poetry transformed the spatial practice of the city.

¹ Bei Dao, "Declaration," *The August Sleepwalker*, trans. Bonnie S. McDougall (New York: New Directions, 1991), lines 1-6.

² Fong-Ching, Chen and Guantao Jin, *From Youthful Manuscripts To River Elegy: The Chinese Popular Cultural Movement and Political Transformation 1979-1989* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1997), 89.

³ Zhu Shuitong and Li Xiaohong, *Zhong Guo Xian Dang Dai Wen Xue* [Chinese Modern and Contemporary Literature] (Kexue Chubanshe, 2000), 101.

⁴ Sang, Renwen, "Fan Dui Ge Ren Zhu Yi [Oppose Individualism]" (*Guangzhou Nanfang Ribao*[*Southern Guangdong Newspaper*], 11 April 1979), 3.

⁵ Perry Link, *The Uses of Literature: Life in the Socialist Chinese Literary System* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 15.

⁶ Rey Chow, "Listening Otherwise, Music Miniaturized: A Different Type of Question About Revolution," in Simon During, ed., *The Cultural Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge Press, 2000), 469.

⁷ Mao, Zedong. "Wen Hua Yi Shu [Culture and the Arts]" in *Mao Zhu Xi Yu Lu* [Sayings of Chairman Mao] (Beijing: Dongfang Chubanshe, 1966).

⁸ Deng, Xiaoping, "Address to Writers' and Artists' Congress, 30 October 1979," in Harold C. Hinton, ed., *The People's Republic of China: A Document Survey* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1986), 351.

⁹ David S. G. Goodman, *Beijing Street Voices* (Boston: Marion Boyars Publishing Ltd. 1981), 3.

¹⁰ Goodman, 162-3.

¹¹ Pan, Yuan and Pan Jie, "The Non-Official Magazine Today and the Younger Generation's Ideals for a New Literature" in Jeffery C. Kinkly, ed., *After Mao Chinese Literature and Society 1978-1981*(Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 201.

¹² James Joyce, *Ulysses* (New York: Random House, 1986), 28.

¹³ Prasenjit Duara, *Chinese Local Elites and Patterns of Dominance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 48.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹⁹ Paul A. Cohen, "Remembering and Forgetting" (*Twentieth Century China* 27.2, April 2002), 9.

²⁰ Cohen, 17.

²¹ Li Hongsheng, "Guangdong Historians Discuss 'Learning from the West'" (*Guangdong Nanfang Ribao* [*Southern Guangdong Newspaper*], 9 Jan 1979), 3.

²² Cohen, 6.

²³ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁴ Shi Zhongquan, "Renew Study, Follow Great Revolutionary Changes" (*Beijing Ribao* [Beijing Newspaper], 4 Jan 1979), 3.

²⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991), 156.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 156.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 37.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 163.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 24.

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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 Post Modernism in Chinese Literary Culture* (Oxford: Alden Press, 1993), 233.
- ³⁶ Goodman, 38.
- ³⁷ Ibid., 38.
- ³⁸ Chen, 89.
- ³⁹ Hung Hsin, "Peking's People-run publication" (*Cheng Ming* 19, March 79), trans. Joint Publications Research Service: Translations on PRC #522 (17 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 During, ed., *The Cultural Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 135.
- ⁴³ Li Honglin, "Exposing and Criticizing the 'Gang of Four' Constitutes a Decisive Battle for a Historical Nature" (*History Research (Lishih yenchiu)* 3, March 1978), 12.
- ⁴⁴ Li Honglin, 13.
- ⁴⁵ Cohen, 9.
- ⁴⁶ Pan, Yuan and Pan Jie "The Non-Official Magazine Today and the Younger Generation's Ideals for a New Literature."
- ⁴⁷ Bei Dao, Personal Interview, 28 March 2002.
- ⁴⁸ Pan, 204.
- ⁴⁹ Michel de Certeau, "Walking in the City" in Simon During, ed., *The Cultural Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 129.
- ⁵⁰ Xiaobing Tang, *Global Space and the Nationalist Discourse of Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 7.
- ⁵¹ Tang, 29.
- ⁵² Pan, 199.
- ⁵³ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 156.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid., 163.
- ⁵⁵ Ibid., 179.
- ⁵⁶ Harold C. Hinton, ed., "The End of Democracy Wall" in *The People's Republic of China: A Document Survey* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1986), 369-370.
- ⁵⁷ Gu Cheng, *Nameless Flowers: Selected Poems of Gu Cheng*, trans. Aaron Crippen (New York: George Braziller, 2005), 19.
- ⁵⁸ Gu Cheng, 21.