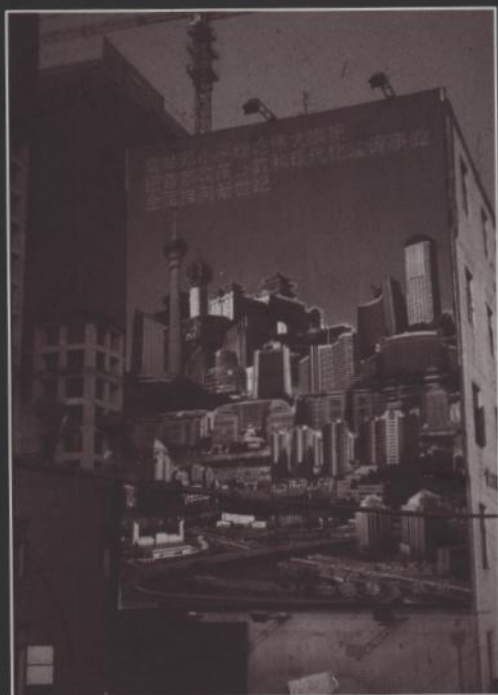


THE MAKING AND SELLING OF
POST-MAO
BEIJING

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show others that resistance to injustice was possible, especially through the formation of grassroots organizations. They planted the seed which would allow for new forms of public discussion to grow, and triggered a change in attitude towards urban governance, one that demands greater accountability in public policies and greater popular participation in urban affairs.

Graffiti Art as Protest: A Dialogue with Zhang Dali

Some individuals have found new, unconventional, and often provocative ways to protest the injustice and alienation that have characterized urban redevelopment and transformed contemporary Chinese society. Artists in particular have played an important role in denouncing the ugly side of the new society and encouraging people to stand up for what they believe in.

The arts have long had the capacity either to reinforce state hegemony in the public sphere or to undermine government legitimacy. While official or public art can be used to support official ideology, public art that is not officially sponsored – graffiti for example – can also destabilize established political actors and contribute to the rise of scepticism in politics.¹² The kind of politically engaged public art which is common in the West is almost unknown in the People's Republic. However, in recent years, artists on the margin of the officially sponsored artistic world have become increasingly involved in denouncing social inequality and voicing popular concerns over public issues. While avoiding direct political attacks and accusing the foreign press of over politicizing their art, these popular artists have played a central part in raising political awareness and have provoked the emergence of a new political consciousness among the population, especially Chinese youth. For example, irreverent poets like the Beijing rock star Cui Jian – branded by some as the Chinese Bob Dylan – have since the late 1980s played such a role on the national scene, using rock performances and lyrics to launch criticisms of the Chinese government and of society at large.¹³

Cui Jian – whose first album, 'Rock and Roll on the New Long March' (1988) is said to have marked the birth of Beijing rock – has long used his image of Rebel Rocker to act as an unofficial spokesperson for Chinese youth. 'Rock and roll must confront reality' he says. 'We have a responsibility to confront society and [to] reflect the dissatisfaction of young people.'¹⁴ Cui Jian's lyrics speak of the alienation of modern city life – denouncing power abuses and rampant corruption – and of the frustrations of the everyday deprivation of personal freedoms.

Dreamed 'bout livin' in modern city space;
Now it's hard to explain what I face;
Skyscrapers poppin' up one by one;
But let me tell ya, life here's no fun.¹⁵

The artist irritated the political establishment by performing in support of the student demonstrations in Tiananmen Square in 1989 and was later banned from playing in front of large audiences for wearing a red blindfold on stage while performing on the government sponsored Asian Games fund raising tour. In 1998, Cui Jian released a new CD entitled 'Power of the Powerless' (*Wu neng de liliang*), with even more political lyrics. 'In a world without heroes' he sings, 'I just want to be a man.'¹⁶

Another Beijing artist has taken a bolder step to reach out to the Beijing population and force people to react to the transformation of their city. Since 1995, the walls of the capital city have been plagued by a mysterious affliction. Large, spray-painted outlines of a human head which seems to scream its disarray in



Figure 6.3. The enigmatic faces of Zhang Dali's *Dialogue* graffiti project covered the walls of Beijing in the late 1990s in a silent protest against the city's unbridled modernization. By piercing holes into the walls on which some of his graffiti are painted, Zhang emphasizes the violence of the government sponsored destruction.

facing a world it no longer recognizes started to appear on buildings throughout Beijing. These enigmatic figures have been disconcerting for Beijing residents, unfamiliar with such bold manifestation of individual expression. The author of this mysterious campaign is Zhang Dali, a well-known figure in the underground Beijing art world.¹⁷ Since 1995, Zhang has taken his bicycle at night to go spray-painting profiles of his own bald head on condemned buildings, freeway bridges, and neglected walls all over the capital. By 1998, over 2000 of these giant heads, sometimes 2 metres tall, had been planted all over Beijing (Figure 6.3).

Zhang Dali decided to use the walls of the city to wage his graffiti war, in reaction to the wave of urban renewal which is transforming Beijing on a scale and pace perhaps never seen in human history. His project, entitled '*Dialogue*' (*Duihua*)¹⁸, is an attempt to shake Beijing residents out of their lethargy and make them react to the way their city is being transformed. 'Walls seal off the Chinese' says Zhang. 'They are afraid of others entering into their life. I go on these walls and enter their life. I open a dialogue with people. I assault them with the knowledge that this city is changing. I don't care if you take part or don't take part, you still have to look at me.'¹⁹



Figure 6.4. The Chinese character *chai* is white-washed by municipal authorities on structures scheduled for demolition throughout the Beijing city.



Figure 6.5. Artist Zhang Dali photographed with his permission in his central Beijing studio with samples of his graffiti project through which he attempts to communicate in a dialogue with contemporary Beijing society.

While Zhang's project brings modernization into question, its purpose is not to denounce the regime's failure to limit the impacts of urban renewal but to sensitize the people of Beijing to how this transformation is also affecting them. Zhang's blank faces invoke the ongoing fragmentation of Chinese society and people's deepening alienation from their environment. The artist uses the ephemeral ruins of the modernizing city as a medium to communicate his message. He intentionally places his graffiti next to 'chai' characters painted by city authorities to indicate that a building is scheduled for demolition, in the hope of raising public awareness of the way the city is condemned to disappear under the pressure of modernization²⁰ (Figure 6.5).

Zhang uses the abstract image of the human head as a tool to facilitate communication between people, which he believes will not only create a more favourable social environment but also forge bonds of solidarity that will empower people and help them fight the injustice of the new society. He does not oppose change *per se* but wishes to denounce the destructive capacity of market-led redevelopment, where people rarely factor into the equation and are treated as collateral damage in the race for profit. By signing some of his work 18K – for 18 carats – Zhang derides China's get-rich mentality, and the avarice he believes has gripped contemporary Chinese society. Although he blames the inhumanity of urban redevelopment upon profit-driven developers for whom nothing is sacred, he also regards redevelopment as an expression of government greed.

Much like generations of emperors before them, present-day leaders, transform the urban environment for their own personal benefits and their unquenchable thirst for power. In their desire to impress the world and leave their mark upon China, they sponsor the construction of colossal monuments celebrating their own glory but whose oppressive monstrosity crushes the hopes of anyone spirited enough to say: 'I am an individual and I can influence my environment'.²¹

The artist paints an apocalyptic vision of Beijing's future, with market reforms

and the breakdown of the socialist system bringing rising social inequality and breeding violence and crime. For Zhang, urban renewal will continue to dehumanize a city where houses already look like prisons, with heavy security gates and irons bars at the windows. This is why he feels the urge to put a human face – quite literally – on the anonymous façades of the changing city and to leave his mark on a society seemingly opposed to spontaneity and light-hearted self-reflection. It is only through concerted efforts and relentless pressure upon the state that the people will be able to take the fate of their city into their own hands.

Over the last fifteen years, Zhang has become an emblem of non-conformity in contemporary China, a symbol of the possibility of self-expression and of the prospect of freeing oneself from government control exerted through housing and job provision. Zhang always refused to fit the mould imposed upon him by the system. He resisted following his parents' footsteps to work in a factory in Harbin and chose to move to Beijing without the security of a *danwei* (work unit) or *hukou* (official registration). Unable to get food, work, or housing through official channels, Zhang joined a group of starving freelance artists who established an artist colony near Yuanmingyuan.

These 'floating artists' – officially classified as part of China's 'floating population' due to their lack of *hukou* – represented an entirely new social category in the Beijing landscape, a new generation of people brave enough – or crazy enough – to get rid of their *hukou* and take their lives into their own hands. Having had the courage to free themselves of the security afforded by the system and to live off their own art without having to depend on the state, they came to symbolize the possibility of freedom and independence in reform-era Beijing. Today, Zhang praises those who, like him, have the nerve to stand up and break free from the limits imposed by the regime. He especially admires migrant peasants who were bold enough to leave the land and seek a better future in the city.

Official reaction to Zhang's faces suggests that the project had enough influence upon public opinion to represent a conceivable threat for the government, not so much for the graffiti themselves as for what they stand for. The state seems afraid that such expression of individualism and lack of conformity with the norms of socialist society might act as a destabilizing factor in the established order and menace the hegemony of power holders. On several occasions, such as before the ceremonies celebrating the Hong Kong handover in July 1997, the Beijing government sent out hundreds of city workers to erase Zhang's faces on the city's walls. Zhang was subsequently questioned by the police, but he was released after he made clear that his art carried no subversive political message.²²

The Beijing press was slow to react to Zhang's project. When the first article appeared in a popular magazine a year after the project began, it was to condemn the anonymous artist and accuse him of vandalism and sabotage.²³ The 1996 article

denounced the ghost-like faces as an uncivilized act, a decadent attempt to pollute the image of the city. It would take two more years for the local press to engage with the project, this time in a more favourable light. Early in 1998, a whole cultural debate on the graffiti project emerged in the Beijing press.²⁴ The media praised the mysterious artist, whose identity remained unknown at the time, for having provided Beijing citizens with a focus for discussions about important collective issues: urban violence, public art, urban redevelopment and environmental policies. Zhang welcomed such media attention, and saw the press as one of the channels through which the 'Dialogue' with the Beijing population could be established and reinforced. Soon after this, the artist finally 'came out' to join in the discussion and give his first newspaper interview in March 1998.²⁵

For Zhang, the success of this city-wide art project rests on the diverse responses it prompted from the public. Because of their obtrusive character and ambiguous meaning, the graffiti left room for multiple interpretations, which spoke of the viewer's personal urban experience, or hidden fears and suspicions. Many people were disturbed by the graffiti, fearing that the sinister faces were the symbol of



Figure 6.6. Graffiti war. Students from the Central Arts Academy painted a red character *chai* on one of Beijing's sleek new taxi stands to mark their disapproval of the design. Similar graffiti have been found on brand new buildings throughout the city in symbolic protest of the rapid changes taking place.

some evil underground society or heralded the imminent demolition of their house. Elderly members of the city's neighbourhood committees talked of vandalism. Younger people, however, generally appreciate the daring, unconventional nature of Zhang's art. By raising eyebrows and prompting questions, Zhang succeeded in exposing Beijingers to the possibility of new forms of public expression, alternative lifestyles, forcing them to become more aware of their environment by thinking about the changes taking place around them, and perhaps to communicate with each other.

Art historian Wu Hung notes that Zhang's art has created a new image for Beijing, as a cosmopolitan city that could tolerate this unconventional type of artistic expression.²⁶ Zhang's most obvious legacy is to have triggered the development of an embryonic graffiti culture in Beijing. Copy cat graffiti of squashed heads with elongated necks started appearing around the city. Students of the Central Arts Academy have also been known to go around the city painting the character '*chai*' (demolish) in red paint on brand new buildings that did not meet their approval, thereby exploiting the power of the graffiti as a form of symbolic resistance. Zhang's vision has thus played a part in raising public awareness and promoting popular opposition to urban renewal, contributing a small step in the development of a fully fledged public sphere. He hopes his efforts will prompt the government to pay more attention to what ordinary people have to say, and eventually allow Beijing residents a voice in the transformation of their city (Figure 6.6).

Architecture as Agent of Change: The Beijing National Theatre

Because of its important role in identity formation and collective representation, architecture carries a greater political influence than is generally acknowledged. In China, popular perceptions of architecture as a shared and collectively owned good, removed from more overtly political issues, has made it a topic around which Chinese people have spontaneously come together to express their opinion. During the 1990s discussions about seemingly innocuous topics such as public monuments and the transformation of the urban environment have increasingly become avenues for public debates and vehicles for the voicing of shared concerns. In this sense, architecture has become a neutral terrain for the expression of discontent about the current political system.

This last section brings together many issues discussed throughout the book and which are related to the politics of image construction and urban redevelopment in Beijing. Through an investigation of the controversies that have surrounded the design of a grand national monument, the Beijing National Theatre, it examines the role of debates over the built environment as a catalyst for the development of a Chinese urban public sphere and a medium through which the democratic