

Walls of Dialogue in the Chinese Space

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Abstract Since the early 1980s, Beijing has been undergoing a period of phenomenal structural transformation and immense growth, as a consequence of the open door policy. The dramatic change of the Chinese capital has progressively forced its inhabitants to face the challenge of managing the fabric and culture of the urban environment in order to adapt to a new city, while burgeoning nationalism and the development of local and international tourism have constructed Beijing as a showcase for national identity. Day after day the traditional houses (*siheyuan*) and tiny alleyways (*hutong*) of Beijing are destroyed, neutralized, and rebuilt to turn the capital into an international metropolis. This article focuses on the graffiti and performance artworks of Beijing-based Zhang Dali — one of the artists most concerned with the transformation of the city. The human head profile that invaded the Beijing cityscape in the 1990s — often found inscribed on the walls and buildings demarcated for destruction (*chai*) — is called “Dialogue” (*duihua*). It is a figurative symbol that cannot escape attention. Investigating Zhang’s work through the lens of Foucault’s and Benjamin’s theoretical approaches to history, this article deals with the relationship between subjective representation and spatial transformation, and raises the critical question of artistic agency in public space.

Keywords Zhang Dali, graffiti, Beijing, walls, city renewal, visual culture, public space, Walter Benjamin, Paul Klee

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In the last few years increasing attention has been focused on the transformation of Beijing, and a common denominator identified by many scholars is the vanishing of the city walls. This pivotal element is immediately associated with material loss, which is geographically bewildering and psychologically unsettling for the people. Some scholars have taken this analysis a step further, looking into the symbolism of walls and addressing the city without walls as a “microcosm of what has happened to Chinese culture.”¹ If this structural transformation reminds us of what many Western cities have undergone in the process of so-called modernization,² and to many

other cities in what seems to be its contemporary equivalent — globalization — the transformation of Beijing also exhibits particular “Chinese characteristics.” In this article, I concentrate on the work of Zhang Dali, an artist who has chosen walls as his canvas, to analyze the association between material walls, culture, and history. My argument is that material loss has deep symbolic implications, both from an objective and a subjective point of view.

Walled culture or walls of culture

There are at least two statements that are worth citing from the literature on walls in China. The first is from Wang Yi, who looks at Beijing’s architectural engineering as an apparently perfect but dangerously interlocking organism:

The degree of sophistication classical Chinese city design had attained was so high, it had become a completely self-referential system, a perfect expression of a codified aesthetics that had gone static. Unable to make the next leap, to revolutionize itself, it had been dwelling on ever-more minute modifications of details. It was like an elaborate structure in which every single building block was placed on a precise spot in a precise relation to the other parts and to the whole, so if you removed any single block, *the entire structure would collapse in a heap*.³

The intricate framework of the city can be thought of as a syntactic structure where walls and gates are the punctuation marking the public space within which the urban community can act and move. This analogy leads to the second quotation, which is from Yang Dongping who defines the whole Chinese nation as a land of the “walled culture,” where “the walls not only block people’s vision, they build up psychological barriers for city people ... reshape and change personalities.”⁴

The conceptualization of a walled culture constitutes the starting point of my analysis, which moves on to different historical, geographical, and epistemological contexts.

Yang Dongping clarifies how the architectural structure of Imperial Beijing was that of a model compound city surrounded by a city wall. During the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), Beijing assumed its compound structure consisting of four tiers, each cordoned off by a wall: “Long before the Ming decision to return the primary capital there, the walls of the former Mongolian imperial city had been rebuilt and reinforced. Work had begun on

the outer wall in 1370 ... The imperial city Beijing as it is known today was essentially complete when the outer city was walled in 1553."⁵ Beijing was to be protected by four strongly fortified walls, plus the Great Wall, located near the city in the mountains, but the city was not as impregnable as it looked. Walls marked the division between the outer (*waicheng*) and the inner city (*neicheng*), walls surrounded the Forbidden City (*zijincheng*), the Imperial City (*huangcheng*), and all the subsidiary units down to the rural town, village, and private home. Traditionally, the basic architectural form of residency in China was the walled compound household (*siheyuan*). This was the typical residential style of the northern farmers:⁶ it consists of a spacious courtyard located at the center of four rooms that are connected to each other becoming a walled structure. The walls look like a sort of "natural surrounding," concentrically materializing the architectural and social mimicry of the notion of the family-state. This structure both reflected social relations, and also played a part in molding and structuring them. Behind every wall, other spaces opened up as discrete sites of activity. The function of walls was not only for security, to keep strangers out, but also to support the Confucian-based patriarchal order among those living inside. The hierarchical nature of traditional architecture and the hierarchical system of social control were closely related. In the mimesis of the compound household form (as in the case of the Emperor's palace), walls demarcated the space of expression and set rules for ordering those who belonged to the family. During the Ming and the Qing (1644–1911) dynasties, precise regulations stipulated building forms, house size, and wall length suitable for the different social classes.⁷

Hwang Ming-Chorng⁸ emphasizes the importance of the symbolic and psychological implication of the walls of Beijing more than their practical (that is military or defensive) aspect. A wall can be seen as the clear demarcation line between what is significant and powerful and what is not: what is inside the wall is sacred and what is outside is human. From a psychological perspective, the wall can be symbolically considered as a womb, it has a feminine shape; it has the effect of embracing, enclosing, securing, and protecting those within its space. At the same time walls must have a gate, that is the way out. Therefore two functions are simultaneously implied: inclusion/exclusion and conjunction at the gate where the two realms meet. Old Beijing was a cultural space characterized and confined by walls.

But the walls came a-tumbling down

Zhang Dali is an artist for whom the deconstruction of walls is an “incitement to discourse”⁹ on the transformation of the city. His work offers an opportunity to explore the im/permeability of walls and to investigate the construction and deconstruction of material and metaphoric walls as codified symbols of national identity.

Zhang Dali's work is located outside the mainstream of the avant-garde tides (“*qianwei yishu*” or “*xinrui yishu*”), even though, having grown up in the milieu of the “reform and opening up” (*gaige kaifang*) of the “new historical period” (*xinshiqi*), he shares with some other avant-garde artists a “sense of commitment” to the metropolis. No longer bounded by the official artistic rules or outmoded guidelines, the tumultuous change of the last two decades has forced a reckoning with a crisis of identity. Change (*bianhua*) can be identified as one of the keywords of contemporary China, having as its semantic counterparts *bianyuanhua* meaning marginalization, and *gehe* meaning estrangement. Rapid urbanization causes estrangement between people, from the official image of reality, and from the formalized language used to represent it. The avant-garde artists have started to experiment with new (and often radically different) creative languages, using the stimuli of urban references to find an individual path of subjective expression amid the chaos and clatter of real life and real people. For these artists art means working in any place with any means: life, creation, and art can happen together.¹⁰

Zhang Dali's work seems quite simple but it is in fact extremely sophisticated, full of symbolic meaning and implications. Zhang Dali started using silkscreen to print his scribbles and environmental artworks but, in the second half of the 1990s, the work that had the greatest impact belongs to what he calls the “Dialogue” (*duihua*) series. Essentially, it is a stylized head profile drawn or chiseled into the walls of Beijing's traditional buildings that have been partially razed or are destined to be torn down. His prototype graffito¹¹ appeared for the first time on Beijing's walls in 1995 and it was quite shocking, especially because it was a disruption both of the barriers imposed by formalized language and of the official use of walls. Within a few years, the head profile had become the symbol of the artist himself and a recurrent motif for anyone who walks the streets of Beijing.

The series named “Dialogue” can be considered a single project. It consists of two different groups of connected works: both are based on the key element of the head profile (*rentouxiang*), although they use different vehicles of

expression. The first group is expressed by means of a visual language (*shijue yuyan*) based on action (or performance) symbols (*xingwei fuhao*), connected and integrated in a symbiosis with environmental structures. In the late 1990s one could find these graffiti works in the streets and in the residential districts undergoing radical change due to urban modernization. The second group consists of collage, oil painting on canvas or silk-screened photographs of the imagery presented in the first group of works. The artist puts this material together on a frame, on a canvas or inside a light box, in which the human head and instant social characters, words or trendy vocabulary (e.g. the computer-based characters-input system called *ma-gen-ma*) become even more closely interrelated and can be perceived as superficial objects. The first group represents the external amplification, the expansion and the explanation, in one word the “substantialization” of the second group. The two groups are like the two extremes of an equation: the condition and the origin are reciprocally interchangeable in an attempt to propel the conceptual intentions and wishes of the artist to its predestined end.

His graffiti works are charged with a thought-skimming conceptual technique, which derives from an openly physical approach to reality, from an epidermal, tactile attachment to the visual signifiers of expression. In a similar way his collage logic answers to an internal mechanism, which moves between islands of significance and evolves through the contamination of various experiences. Its distinctiveness lies in what the artist creates by taking away, through a process of subtraction. Zhang Dali finds his material in the streets, extracts images that are accessible to anybody at any time; he extracts the essence of urbanity that is, in China as in many countries creating “generic cities,” the core of a certain style of modernization. He selects isolated but dialectically interrelated fragments of meaning that appear to be shreds of thought first hacked to pieces and then reorganized by the artist himself.

Through his subjective code of emotional and artistic expression, Zhang Dali offers the possibility of a dialogue on what is, in the artist’s mind, the heart of the matter: the material and spiritual change of the metropolis. The collage logic applied by Zhang Dali combines and animates the images in a new context, which is the final result of this hybridization of languages and cultures. His works create a new reference paradigm of biological and structural chaos, which characterizes our epoch and dominates the metamorphosing urbanity of contemporary Beijing as well. The most peculiar example is the light box. As far as light boxes go, the artist suggests that they

should be ideally placed back on the streets, positioning them in the middle of a scene shared between the advertising industry and the state-administered propaganda. The art critic Mathieu Borysevicz argues:

Taking the head from the street (amid deconstruction, turmoil, and change) and placing it back onto the street (of cosmopolitanism, modernity, and chicness) is a strategy that draws attention to the degree of contrast in today's China. It is a gesture that addresses the strides capitalism has made into a system that still professes socialism, and it demonstrates the continued envelopment of the individual in both.¹²

The content of the work

The three key elements of the “conceptual art” (*guannian yishu*) of Zhang Dali, intended as an art based on the strict connection between an artist's life and artwork, are three symbols (*san ge fuhao*):

- A human head profile spray-painted on condemned walls and freeway bridges, or engraved, using hammer and chisels, to destroy the inner part of the profile knocking it through the wall.¹³ This double act of graffiti plus physical destruction gives a sense of double aggression, alluding both to the aggression of the city per se, and to the way the transformation of the city affects the lives of the citizens.
- The tag AK-47 sprayed on the walls is a “word image” used like a *nom de guerre*. AK-47 is a Soviet assault weapon and it represents the violence (*baoli*) of a community being ripped apart. Zhang Dali wants to talk about destructive violence and he shoots, using spray paint and hammer instead of a real gun: “If I use this name, I make people think about the Third World, the violence of the cities, and the wild hooligan culture. That's not what people want to think about in Beijing today!”¹⁴ The assault weapon AK-47 is an imagery Zhang Dali uses to talk about a war (and in Beijing, during the last few years, old buildings have been erased at a pace faster than that of wartime Berlin and London), but what Zhang Dali is exposing is also a dialectic war of signifier (the sound-image AK-47) and signified (the violence of the city and in the city), a war of style and content.
- 18k is another “word image” which stands for 18-carat gold and represents a symbol for the “economic life of the city” (*chengshide jingji shenghuo*). It is the demystification of the “get-rich mentality” (which is one of the core reasons for the destruction of the old buildings) and a condemnation of the avarice that has gripped the city.

The title chosen by the artist, “Dialogue,” represents another important element. “Dialogue” for Zhang Dali means first of all to exchange ideas and per-

sonal experiences related to the repercussions of the change of the city on the life of individuals. Zhang Dali's artistic work is, in Foucauldian terms, an "incitement to discourse" on the forms of spatial transformation/domination, and raises the critical question of artistic agency in public space. The purpose of his work is to help create a dialogue, which means to create the preconditions to analyze and penetrate as a dialectic dimension a set of inter-related opposites like "demolish houses" (*chai fangzi*) — "build houses" (*gai fangzi*), "development of the city" (*chengshide fazhan*) — "violence of the city" (*chengshi de baoli*). The artist through his work offers his own subjective intrinsic connection network of these antinomies. But "Dialogue" was also the title chosen for the installation by Xiaolu and Tang Song (the full title was: *Two gunshots fired at the installation "Dialogue"*) at the opening of the China Avant-garde Exhibition (*Zhongguo xiandai yishuzhan*) at the National Gallery of Beijing, in February 1989, two months before the beginning of the students' demonstration which led to the tragic epilogue of the Tiananmen Square Massacre on June 4, 1989.¹⁵ Not coincidentally, "Dialogue" was repeated over and over again as one of the fundamental keywords during the students' movement in 1989 — expressing one of the main requests of the students, in the sense of a dialogue with the government.¹⁶

The origin of the technique and Zhang Dali's added value

The idea of graffiti art came to Zhang Dali while he was living in Italy (after the June 4th incident)¹⁷ and he saw some walls covered with murals, tags, and incendiary slogans. Undoubtedly, Zhang got his artistic inspiration from the leading figures of the New York graffiti movement of the 1970s (Rammellzee, Haring, etc.). The basic act of graffiti as "scribbling," or the simple gesture of inscribing signs on a surface remains a fundamental action, which in itself is prior to history and cannot be inhibited either by history or by any kind of "progress" or "modernization." As Zhang Dali says: "Human beings leave signs in the cities" (*renlei zai chengshi zhong liuxia yinji*).¹⁸ The art critic Francesca Alinovi has defined graffiti as a "frontier art," the art of "unsettled outposts."¹⁹ If one considers Keith Haring for example, his work can be defined as a pictorial form of writing, made up of a tangle of marks in ink and white chalk, which run like streams of images in perennial permeation and metamorphosis. Keith Haring used to draw in public spaces what was to become his symbol: the "Radiant Child."

In a similar way, starting from the axiom that “painting has an extremely limited effect on society” as only “a tiny number of people” (*shaoshuren*) go to art galleries in Beijing, Zhang Dali draws the human head profile in the open to offer his message to everyone endowed with eyes. Zhang Dali argues: “In the studio painting is just a style. On the street, it has meaning (*you yiyi*), it becomes part of people’s lives.”²⁰ This declaration also suggests a sort of consciousness of the potentiality of graffiti as a medium of an active dialogue between people who have no other outlet for expressing themselves. Zhang Dali had the opportunity to live in two microcosms of the “East” and the “West,” and even though revealing a certain degree of essentialization, he reached the following conclusion: “Asians always want to avoid expressing themselves, letting their thoughts get trapped in their heart, but (they are) your ideas, why do you want to keep them inside?”²¹

For Zhang Dali, the content of art is as important as the artistic activity that is strictly connected to life. He argues: “This is a kind of living art” (*zhe shi yizhong shenghuohuade yishu*). It is the context, including the choice made by the artist using a certain medium of expression, which gives a semantic significance to the work. It is the relation between the work and its context, which creates new circuits of semantic energy that is the precondition for the dialogue of interior subjectivities. The New York graffiti artists used to draw on every available flat surface. Keith Haring stated: “My drawings spread over a surface and show themselves for what they are.” This means that there is no illusion, there is nothing hidden, but at the same time he emphasizes a creative power: “My drawings aim at activating a surface and sending out energy, transforming a neutral, anonymous surface, and giving it a personality.”²² Zhang Dali acts in a similar, but at the same time, different way. He works on things, which are already unconscious images, and on ideas, which are universal archetypes or stereotypes. The artist interferes with them, putting them together in a precise way and infusing into them the strength derived from his subjective perception and re-elaboration. Through his personal visual code, he conveys to the viewer the instinctive inner reaction he feels after a sort of sudden awakening.

Back in China, after a few years spent abroad, Zhang Dali perceived, in all its violence, the abrupt change of the cityscape, which is officially celebrated as a result of the “modernization” and “beautification” urban program. Zhang Dali felt that he had a specific aim, which goes beyond the “iconoclastic panzerism” of Rammelmee:²³ he wanted to invite people to discuss the transformation of the city. A fundamental discriminating factor, compared to

the other graffiti artists, consists in the fact that Zhang Dali chooses wrecked walls that already have a personality and a peculiarity of their own, especially in Beijing.

The message and the novelty of the artist

The works by Zhang Dali embody his view of Chinese cities, which he defines as “ruralized cities” (*nongyehuade chengshi*) or “cities involved in a process of urbanization” (*chengshi yizhi zai chengshihuade goucheng dangzhong*).²⁴ He sees these cities as constrained within the vicious circle of urban deconstruction/destruction and construction, without preservation of the cultural significance of the historical dwellings (that is the same destiny shared by many other Third World metropolises). His work can be interpreted as a criticism of the “fever” of building houses without taking into consideration any aesthetic and historical relation with the pre-existing topography.²⁵

His art has also been called “social art” (*shehui yishu*) and “ecological art” (*shengtai yishu*).²⁶ The artist is a witness who intends to contribute, with his work, to preserve as a document the urban transformation process that has amputated and vandalized the environment. This is the real disfigurement of the cityscape, much more than Zhang Dali’s works. Zhang Dali, as well as many other avant-garde Chinese artists, has elaborated a jargon of his own. He has created a subjective expressive linguistic medium whose insidious strength disarticulates conventional language and breaks down the network of associations established by the rules of official communication.

At the dawn of the Olympic Games scheduled for Beijing in 2008, the Chinese government is doing its best to convey to the whole world the idea and the image of Beijing as the hyper-realistic plasticized city of “triumphant modernization.” Every year Chinese magazines are full of articles like “Beijing becoming an international metropolis.”²⁷ The agenda of the Chinese economic reform program has set among its priorities the commitment “to quicken the pace of urbanization during the next fifteen years” as “cities are playing the role of the engine of the economic reform.”²⁸ As far as Beijing is concerned, the regime of power is trying to project a facade of hypermodernity: “As the cultural and political center of China, the city is expected to become an international metropolis in the 21st century.”²⁹

The wording of these articles reads as a macabre version of the nationalistic inheritance of the ancient sacred city of Beijing. In the meantime, avant-garde artists have thrown themselves into the wreckage of reality and the

rubble of society to collect and repropose the signs of slums, trash, decay, violence, and the spread of AIDS across China, as well as in many other Third World metropolises. This apparently eccentric, cultural avant-garde group has invented a private jargon, which has attracted the attention of many Asia watchers and art critics around the world. This group of artists has succeeded in finding a new, and even more real, Chinese language with both substantial and subjective "Chinese characteristics." In this way, they have managed to legitimize their minority status and territorial violation of a consolidated majority language: the formalized language of the Party. From this perspective, they appear to be a mirror reflection of the New York graffiti artists.

In the art scene at the beginning of the 1980s, the "red-skins and pale-faces" were living in a personal condition of natural and cultural confusion characterized by a crisis of values, confidence, and identity; through experimentation, they managed to coin their own personal slang, confusing, distorting, and finally innovating the current systems of communication. The kids of Beijing, born during the Cultural Revolution, grew up in the *gaige kaifang* period. Some of them took advantage of it, "going to the sea" (*xiahai*) of business opportunities, while some of them "went off duty" (*xiagang*) and were forced to act as outcasts on the outskirts of the new Eldorado. Some of them escaped or temporarily retired after June 4th (*liusi*). Afterwards, some of them went back to the motherland, being often recompensed with an "unrequited love" (to paraphrase Bai Hua's incriminating novel).³⁰ Once back in China — as well as abroad — they started to experiment and coin new expressive medium and languages.

The choice of walls as canvas

Zhang Dali did not choose the walls of condemned buildings around the city as canvases for his particular and innovative graffiti by chance. His artistic creation is the expression of a true search for an identity with subjective and profound "Chinese traits."³¹ Since Beijing, during the Ming–Qing period, has traditionally been the residence of the Son of Heaven, the occupant of the dragon throne, the act of breaking a wall can be interpreted as desecration, as wounding the body of the dragon/Emperor. Zhang Dali can spray (in other words, shoot) on the walls (*qiang*) of Beijing today since the city (*cheng*) without walls is no longer a sacred city or, in Foucauldian terms, the regime of power does not correspond any more to the regime of truth.³²

Now that the city has been secularized, the broken walls may be chosen by the artist as the screen on which the multifaceted spectacle of city life is projected. The walls of the ruined buildings are humanized: Zhang in an interview used the word *biaoqing*, which means “expression,” and often refers to facial expressions or to feelings. Actually, the ancient city walls seem about to express a physical resistance against the impending death. Walls are the structures on which “human beings leave their signs” (*liuxia yinji*) so that walls might be used to narrate the fluctuating consciousness of sight as they are able to register the hopes of the city (through their reinforcement or remodeling), to give voice to the people (through the shadows of their bodies passing by), to express the different feelings and opinions as walls are part of the social discourse. Now that “icy skyscrapers have taken the places of the old houses and the memory of the past is becoming vague and disrupted,”³³ walls seem to cry out for revenge with vital, frozen energy. Zhang Dali gives shape to this inner force acting as a contemporary astonished witness of the disruption of harmony between cosmic and terrestrial forces that characterized traditional Beijing.

Zhang Dali’s works, especially the silk-screened ones, reflect mutation at the level of cognitive perception processes as a precursor of cosmic mutation. They testify the artist’s desire to capture forever the very last moment of life of the old houses: “Old houses should be preserved: they are part of the history and the story of a city. The old houses are the city’s roots and they are important to our cultural life.”³⁴ His works can be interpreted as an attempt to defeat, through the subjective reproduction of the images, the annihilating force of the modernization drive with “Chinese (or global?) characteristics.”

In the late 1990s, some of Zhang Dali’s works could be found on the main avenues, others in the surviving tiny alleyways (*hutong*) that run through the old housing area, crossing the traditional old area of the capital. His works have increasingly become a permanent/impermanent part of the urban landscape, even though it is clear that their life is temporally limited, due to the demolition of those same buildings, and spatially limited, due to the progressive lack of this kind of “canvases.” The walls are for Zhang Dali “the projection screen of the modification of this city” (*zhengshi shi ge chengshi bianhuade yi kuai yinmu*) that is changing without any rule, without “anybody knowing how the environment and our city will change.”³⁵

In front of this “screen” that is changing in the twinkling of an eye, the artist has completely transformed what is traditionally considered to be his common position and duty. He has decided to resort to the insight of the

historian and the acumen of the sociologist, and to exercise the right of a citizen who takes responsibility: "I want to create a dialogue between the image and a real person." This is Zhang's declaration of intent, which indicates a signal of revenge together with the affirmation of his interior subjectivity. Zhang Dali seems to agree with Zhang Nianchao's assertion that "the city is a form of expression of the modern society" (*chengshi shi shehui biao xian xing-shi*), as if it was a sort of miniature version of it, and "an artistic work is a form of expression of an artist's thought" (*zuopin shi sixiang de biao xian xing-shi*).³⁶

As Zhang Dali suggested in an interview, the transformation of the city is perceived in his works as a metaphor for the transformation of the individual microcosm. His work is the symbolic representation of the sense of violence (*baoli*) and the feeling of uneasiness and psychological insecurity. Violence, uneasiness, and insecurity (*bu'an*): these words give us a completely anti-thetic mental picture compared to the alleged successful, eulogistic official image, which is based on the key-concept "to preserve order and stability."³⁷ After a performance held on a building demolition site along the second Ring Road of eastern Beijing, Zhang Dali declared:

Just as in my life, many things are happening in this city: demolition (*chai*), construction (*jian*), car accidents, sex, drunkenness, and violence infiltrate every hole. In the vastness of the city, many things that happen are not clear, nor do we know the ultimate result as people are made nervous, scattered, and insecure (*bu'an*). Moreover, the corners of the city are in total chaos and disorder. Waste builds up in every corner of the city. People eat, defecate, and sleep among the garbage. Children look for toys. The water running through the city is oily, bleak, and stinking. On the grass or hanging from the branches of trees, plastic bags dangle, moving with the wind as heads without soul or like gashed hands. People wearing starched suits walk into the main entrance of hotels and exit through the back door onto dark, dirty, muddied lanes. I choose these walls that are spray painted with the image of a human head. They are the screens onto which the show of this city is projected. The screen becomes a normal but realistic working place ... nothing else. Only one and a half hours. The sound of the hammer and chisels. Bricks fall, stirring up clouds of dust. Behind the wall a modern neoclassical, shiny mansion appears.³⁸

Reactions to Zhang Dali's work

The works of Zhang Dali are probably, among the avant-garde group, the ones that remind us most of the youth of New York, who at the end of the 1960s started to draw and paint their signatures or tags on the passenger

cars of the subway.³⁹ When at the beginning of the 1970s (1972–73) the black tags became bigger and the drawings progressively developed into the enormous colorful murals that covered the entire passenger car, “people were astonished and in the subway stations reacted as if they felt threatened by an enemy” but “it was now too late to fight.”⁴⁰

The connection between graffiti and petty crime was taken for granted. Newspapers and magazines wrote about this growing phenomenon. The New York City Government and the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) began a campaign against graffiti and initiated a cleanup of the subway.

In China, Zhang Dali cultivated his own work. It took time for Zhang Dali, at first labeled a “vagrant artist” (*liulang yishujia*), to be recognized as a “graffiti artist” (*tuya yishujia*)⁴¹ or, even better, as a “conceptual artist” (*guannian yishujia*)⁴² and, finally, an “eco-artist” (*shengtai yishujia*).⁴³

At the very beginning, the mildest description of his work was “strange thing” (*guaiwu*) or “weird image” (*guaidanxingxiang*). The conclusion was that “the fundamental attitude of the public towards this kind of graffiti in the capital is that they do not understand, they are disgusted, and want to boycott it” (*gongzhong dui zhege jingcheng tuya xiangxiang de taidu jiben shi bu lijie, fangan he dizhi*).⁴⁴ His graffiti work was immediately labeled by the neighborhood committee members as “sabotage” or borderline “vandalism.” Some local officials demanded his arrest and that he should be forced to clean the dirty walls. His work was condemned as “detrimental to the beauty of the city” (*zhe tai you aishirong*): some local officials of the bureaus for comprehensive improvement (*zonghezhenzhibumen*) — in charge of what is called “the maintenance of a clean and tidy city” (*baochi shirong zhengjie*) — described the artist’s work as “a problem which mars the appearance of the city, a violation, a disordered writing and painting” (*ai shirongweifafa luanxie luanhuade wenti*).⁴⁵ An “old resident of Beijing” (“*lao Beijing*”) demanded that Zhang be put in prison for years (*shijinian laohaozuo*).⁴⁶

It is important to point out that as far as the usage of walls is concerned, in China only the government is allowed to use this space. Walls are monopolized by notices about parking, garbage, and venereal diseases, as well as being tools of the public symbology of the state-administered propaganda. This is especially true in the small villages, like in the case of the “Three emphases” (*sanjiang*) campaign in the late 1990s to “stress study, politics, and healthy trends.”⁴⁷ Every unofficial usage of walls in the past has brought

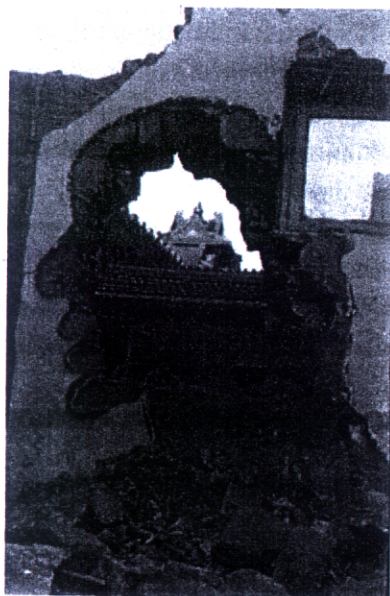


Figure 1 Dialogue, Forbidden City, Beijing 1998

forth a tragic epilogue, as in the case of the posting of *dazibao* on the wall of Xidan during the pro-democracy movement in 1978–79.

In order to understand the negative official reaction, it is necessary to take into consideration two factors. First, the same “dirty” walls on which Zhang Dali performed his works had been already slated for demolition and were marked by the Chinese character *chai*.⁴⁸ It is interesting to observe that the destruction of the “old and shabby” buildings in Beijing (the Chinese term is *pojiu*, but this is just an euphemism used to avoid calling them ancient) is not considered an “act of vandalism” or “sabotage” if this measure is decreed by the municipal government, while the partial knocking down of a wall targeted for demolition is promptly condemned to be an act of “vandalism.” On the other hand, these broken walls with graffiti have been transformed into props for the artist calling for a *dialogue* (not necessarily an official one) focused on the social implications of the rapid surge of “modernization” that has destroyed old houses and traditional *hutong*.

Zhang’s work has also been labeled a kind of pollution (*wuran*), a word that in this case might also imply a “spiritual” meaning. The artist’s response is as follows: “Aside from the air, the real pollution in this city is the large number of ugly buildings. The buildings on Chang’an Avenue are all built in different styles, but the one thing they have in common is their unsightliness.”⁴⁹



Figure 2 Demolition, Forbidden City, Beijing 1998

One Beijing resident spoke of a sense of psychological oppression, as he had to look at the “threatening” head profile on his way to the office every day: he declared that he felt depressed and was unable to work the whole day. The artist has demonstrated a capacity to create intermittent waves of interference, capable of undermining even the most confident forms of communication. The repetitive figurative symbology employed by Zhang Dali has a persuasive, even violent, strength, but eventually it is the viewer who projects his own imaginary expression, trying to fill the vacuum of the hole or the line of the spray-painted profile. Therefore, according to the viewer’s subjective perception, the graffiti work can produce an effect of wonder or oppression (that can be felt as physical aggression too), or it can be perceived as humorous, melancholic, even serious.

The human profile is halfway between the autobiographical and the impersonal, the mythical (like a modern version of the enigma of the Sphinx), and the real. Zhang Dali’s inspiration, in a way similar to Keith Haring’s, seems to be drawn from a childish temptation⁵⁰ but in this case it is a temptation to destroy conceived as the only possibility to re-create. His work is primarily based on a stylized image that can be drawn or chiseled on walls, and in this way it is reworked in a subjective way.

The first group of the “Dialogue” series brings forth a social reaction that is both aesthetic and psychological and consists of three elements:

1. The possibility to work at will, feeling comfortable, with a great flexibility. The artist can draw thick lines with spray that symbolically reproduce the profile of a head that can be his own or everybody’s.

2. The direction of the artist shows a precise choice that is made by connecting or disconnecting some parts and scenes of the old city. Those buildings are marked for demolition but are humanized by the artist who sprays on the walls the stylized profile of the human head profile.

3. This symbolic representation of the head is quite peculiar and full of implications: it makes public the metamorphosis of the city, a change in trend, conditions, and mentality that goes beyond the walls of the street. The head has both a concise and clear identifiability, and at the same time it contains information that can be difficult to understand. Therefore its ambiguity makes people think in a manner beyond logic and above reason.

The artist insists on calling his work “outdoor art” and defending himself from the accusation of committing a crime: “I don’t know what law exists against outdoor art.” One could remark that it sounds a bit naive and strange to listen to this kind of declaration in a city where authorities routinely close down exhibitions, as, for example, with “Departures from China” (*Cong Zhongguo chufa*), the exhibition scheduled for April 1999 at the Design Museum (*Sheji bowuguan*), which was not even allowed to open due — officially at least — to the “lack of fire extinguishers.”⁵¹

Zhang Dali’s work is created outdoors as it is directed at Beijing’s citizens: it was conceived as a way to mobilize in their minds and their souls unfamiliar mechanisms of interpretation, and to force them to act as responsible

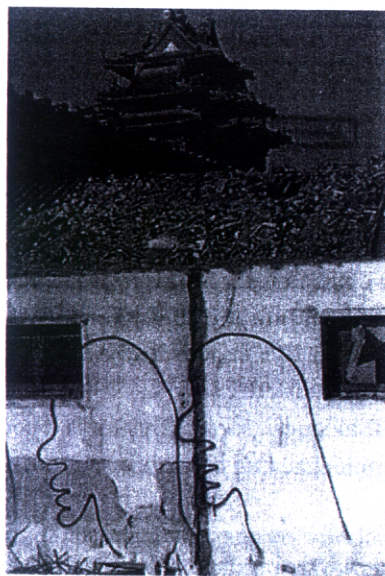


Figure 3 Demolition and Dialogue, Chaoyangmenwai Avenue, Beijing 1998

citizens aware of their subject positions. His works are performed on Beijing's walls so that the citizens cannot escape them. He calls his work "dialogue" as he believes that this visual image can act as an "incitement to discourse" on a society in transition. The citizens of Beijing cannot just simply pass by; they are undoubtedly called, stimulated, and incited by the subjective visual code of the artist, so that they have to reckon with his iconographical language resulting from the synthesis of repetitive stylized primitive — even childish — images, alphanumeric figures, and objective material deconstruction works.

Zhang Dali has an epidermal relationship with Beijing, with its walls, and with their surfaces where he sprays his graffiti works. Physical attachment to the symbolic tools of their language is a constant characteristic of the artist's experimenting or inventing new linguistic or visual codes, because avant-garde language is first of all a personal, emotional language springing from an inner catalysis of external impulses received by the individual.

Some brash foreign journalists interpreted Zhang Dali's work as a "declared graffiti war on the demolition of the old quarters." They tried, somewhat dubiously, to link this protest against the changing city to some previous more famous and dramatic "protest acts," like the Democracy Wall that was suppressed in the spring of 1979 and which cost years of prison for many dissidents *ante litteram*.⁵² One critic, focusing on the head as the portrait of the artist, emphasized the emotive characteristics of the head profile haunting all corners of the city: the huge forehead perhaps symbolically expresses the effort of thinking and pondering reality, the gaping look embodied by the open mouth, indicated by the absence of eyes, the height of the head (sometimes nearly two meters tall), might be interpreted as a silent astonished sign of stupefaction looking at the change of the city.⁵³ Another enthusiastically proclaimed his work as a "quixotic mission to halt the bulldozing of huge tracts of the capital's traditional lanes and courtyards to make way for apartment blocks, flashy department stores and subway stations."⁵⁴

Attainment of his goal: the dialogue

The most interesting phenomenon is the proliferation of intentional and unintentional attention to Zhang Dali's work reviewed in the local newspapers, making it a public issue. While giving voice, through reporting of the reactions of the public, both to the complaints and comments of the art critics, the newspapers have become the most suitable means of expression

for the artist's desire for a "dialogue." Inadvertently, the newspapers entered into the exchange of ideas on the city, at the very beginning, by the obvious and inevitable questions: "What is that head? Why did somebody do that? Who did it?" "How can you call that art?!" In so doing, the newspapers have created a channel of communication. In other words, they have implicitly resolved to participate in the dialogue with Zhang Dali on the issue of the last powerful, and probably the most successful, campaign launched by the regime: the campaign to produce cities (*zhizao chengshi yundong*).⁵⁵

The reactions of the citizens to Zhang Dali's work can also be considered as a series of signals testifying to the appearance of symbolic markers of an interior subjectivity: the progressive struggle of a changing sense of self/place is emerging in China. Zhang Dali's work is proof of the changing nature and forms of subjectivity in big metropolises such as Beijing, where modern artists are in search of their own identity (even though not necessarily "new" in the official sense), and in search of a suitable language to express their ideas, feelings, emotions, and inner selves.⁵⁶

Certainly, the change of subjectivity has a lot to do with the socioeconomic structural transformation of Chinese cities. In the past, for instance, would a person working in a typical ubiquitous work unit (*danwei*) and living in the work unit compound have had a chance to see the graffiti on broken walls? Of course, he/she might have had this opportunity, but it would have been more difficult and the kind of reaction would also have been quite different.

A city is an ensemble of many things: an amalgam of memories, desires, and signs of language. Cities are places for exchange, exchange of goods, and also the exchange of words, desires, recollections, and ideas. As Italo Calvino demonstrated with his masterpiece *Invisible Cities*, there are inner cities that exist in people's minds, beside and beyond the visible cities. Zhang Dali seems to suggest the possible existence of other cities (precisely inner cities) for people who do not accept the "urban reform plan" (*chengshi jihua gaige*) of demolition without preservation. While material walls have come down and mental walls have gone up in the new China with its "socialist economy of the market," the artist seems to go beyond mere denunciation, suggesting through his subjective creative process, the possibility of building an alternative new city to live in — in one's own mind — seeing but not looking, hearing but not listening to the sound of the metropolis paradigmatic of globalized modernization.

Zhang Dali's work can be also considered, like Calvino's work, "the last love poem to the cities," at the exact moment when it becomes more and

more difficult to live in them. The “invisible city” of Beijing that Zhang Dali seems to suggest is a dream built of desires and fears, a dream that derives from the heart of an uninhabitable and inhuman city. In today’s Beijing, everybody can see a deep incommunicability between the idea of the ancient city and the new one. The city is no more “the place of indivisible existence” (to paraphrase Calvino’s definition), but it is also true that, as Calvino states, “The metropolis has an additional attractiveness: through what it has become it can rethink with nostalgia what it was like.”⁵⁷

Zhang Dali is a witness to what Beijing was and is like. In Calvino’s book the visionary traveler Marco Polo tells stories of impossible cities to the melancholic emperor who has realized that his immense power is progressively vanishing: “In the life of the emperor there is a moment, a desperate moment when you discover that this empire that seemed to be the summa of all the marvelous things is collapsing into a endless and shapeless decay” — or one could say going to pieces like an ancient wall — that “its corruption is too gangrenous for the imperial scepter to find a remedy, that the triumph over the opposing sovereigns has made of us the heirs of their long ruins.”⁵⁸

Zhang Dali tells the story of the microscopic city that is increasingly expanding, resulting in a city that in reality consists of many concentric cities in expansion, like a “city spider web” hanging over the abyss. But today the emperor pretends to be unaware that the empire “is putrefying like a corpse in the quagmire”: he seems not to realize that his empire “is ill and, what is worse, tries to become inured to its sores.”⁵⁹

A broken wall as the angel of history: a personal interpretation of Zhang Dali’s work

The denouement of the material and cultural catastrophe that Zhang’s work addresses insistently calls to mind Walter Benjamin’s suggestive ninth thesis on the “Philosophy of History,”⁶⁰ inspired by the 1920 watercolor *Angelus Novus*, by the Swiss painter Paul Klee.⁶¹ In his text, Benjamin proposed a visual allegory of this artwork, which emphasized the restless connection between the individual and history. Zhang Dali’s “dialogue” with the city through the walls can be compared to Paul Klee’s (or better to Walter Benjamin’s) angel of history whose face is turning to the past:

There is a painting by Paul Klee called *Angelus Novus*. In it, an angel is depicted who appears as if he is trying to distance himself from something he is fixedly con-

templating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are stretched to their limit.

The Angel of History must look this way; his face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a constant chain of events, *he* sees only one single catastrophe incessantly piling up ruin upon ruin and hurling them at his feet.

The angel would probably like to stop, wake the dead, and make whole what has been smashed — but a storm is blowing hard from Paradise that has got caught in his wings, and its strength is such that the angel can no longer fold them.

While the rubble heap mounts up to the heavens before his eyes, the storm drives him irresistibly into the Future, to which his back is turned.

What we call Progress: that is this storm.⁶²

Behind and within the problematic horizon suggested by Benjamin, it is necessary to consider the crisis of historicism, the end of the idea that history is a “linear unwinding,” along with the perception among Euro-American left-wing intellectuals that historical materialism is not just a philosophy of certainty projected towards the future. In the Chinese case the linearity of history is even more difficult to perceive, as circularity is more suitable to describe Chinese historical development. What interests me here is that Benjamin’s thesis on the *Angelus Novus* creates a resonance, by juxtaposition, with Zhang Dali’s walls of discourse. I am particularly interested in Zhang Dali’s use of perspective to encapsulate the complexity of the historical process of transformation of the city.⁶³

Chinese art has been based for centuries on a precise relation between structure and space organization that privileges the plan of the object. When foreshortening and *quadraturism*⁶⁴ were introduced in China during the High-Qing period,⁶⁵ the traditional emphasis on the surface was challenged by the idea typical of the Renaissance period that mathematics and art are closely connected. Foreshortening offered to art a new multidimensional visualization: it implies a completely new “language of vision”⁶⁶ as it requires the representation of objects as they really appear to the eye in all situations, not on the same plane. Symbolically speaking, foreshortening has been defined as the art of rationalizing or humanizing sight.

Zhang Dali’s work proposes a visual allegory of a multiplane and also a spectator-centered projection into Chinese time and space. This operation could be defined as a process of historical foreshortening that reveals the adoption of another point of view as compared to the plane of the subject or

the object per se. The artist is aware of the existence of the vanishing point and decides to place himself at a “distance” (by working at night) but he does not disappear. His artistic gesture is an incitement to open discourse on the spatial and temporal multiplanes of the city, which leads to the opening of a discourse through the walls of history.

My perception of Zhang Dali’s work overlaps with Benjamin’s interpretation of Klee’s painting. I argue that the ninth thesis can be used to analyze the transformation of Beijing through Zhang Dali’s work. The wall is the Chinese traditional element par excellence, which assumes the connotation of the correlative object and substitutes Klee’s *Angel*. Klee’s *Angel* looks behind just as Zhang Dali invites the spectator, who in this specific case can also be a passer by, to look behind (temporally) by means of looking (spatially) through the wall. In this sense, Zhang Dali is indeed a traditional Chinese painter who believes that to compel belief in reality where there is only a flat surface is contrary to nature, but there is also a postmodern nuance in his work as he proposes to remain even more faithful to the structure of reality by breaking the surface (the wall) to reveal another historical dimension.

The discourse that can be opened here for a historian is not only a critique of historicism, but also a critical investigation of the role of the historian and the confutation of his/her alleged objectivism induced by the acritical use of sources and documents from which too often emerges the surreptitious tendency to rewrite history objectively, or in other words, to write historical events “as they really occurred.” As Benjamin critically wrote in 1917: “The historian is a prophet who is looking behind”⁶⁷ and historiography (irrespective of whether we consider the ideological or the positivistic trends), in its focus on the nature of making history more than history in the making, has indeed shown a tendency to have the past function as a model for the present, instead of proposing a self- or place-conscious way of making history. The principle of exclusion, which draws an artificial line between the past and the present, has dominated historiography, inhibiting the possibility of coexistence of the past with the present. This is a critical element in historiography.

Zhang Dali’s work invites his audience to look through the walls, offering them the possibility to navigate through the past and reunite in the present the undermining disruption of historical continuity.⁶⁸ Zhang Dali’s reduplication, or better anticipation, of the breach in walls, which are doomed to be torn down, cannot be presented only as a sign of melancholic “nostalgia” for the past or as an inspiration for a potentially better tomorrow. His artistic creation reveals a different way of thinking about the city, and it suggests a

different way to conceive history and culture, conceptualizing their intimate relation in a new continuum, which runs parallel to the continuum created by the interconnection of gates and walls in shaping the block diagram of old Beijing.

At the center of this relation with history, there is no gnoseological datum (such as the “knowledge of history”), but an attempt to connect to the present the interrupted possibilities of the past, considering them, even re-evaluating them as instruments for a possible future. In this sense, to know history becomes a way to “appropriate (or reappropriate) the past,” by means of translating it in a political act and in this sense redeeming it. One of the possibilities from the past would have been the alternative urban development plan envisioned for Beijing by Liang Sicheng (1901–1972),⁶⁹ an architect trained at the University of Pennsylvania in the 1920s, and vice-chairman of the Beijing Urban Planning Committee, who in 1950 proposed a plan for the preservation of the historical city enclosed within its city walls, along with the construction of a new city center in the western suburbs, next to the cultural center. In 1953, the municipal government voted against Liang’s plan that was considered “mistaken” and “impractical” when compared with the plan advocated by the Soviet expert team who arrived in Beijing in September 1949 and proposed a blueprint derived from the 1935 Moscow General Plan to transform Beijing into the symbol of the newly founded socialist state. The Soviet-style modernization of Beijing led in the late 1950s to the first large-scale dismantling of the city walls, now considered a symbol of “feudalism” and an obstacle for modern-day traffic.

Looking through the walls today creates a new discourse on the history of the city. This idea of “appropriating the past” harks back to Benjamin’s language and to his concept of “antihistory”, which suggests the possibility to rediscover a “forgotten” or “hidden” dimension but implies also the necessity to learn from the past what is *oppositional* to this present.⁷⁰ The image that Benjamin proposes is that of “the past coming to converge with the present in a new constellation” and this is something that exists and pulses in Zhang Dali’s walls project.

Benjamin’s “Theses” argue: “History, in a rigorous sense, is therefore *an image* that derives from the involuntary recollection. An *image* that suddenly imposes itself on the subject of history in the moment of danger.”⁷¹ In the process of recollection, there is a space for action or counteraction and this is the place where dialogue should intervene. Wu Hung argues that Zhang Dali’s work did not really succeed in engaging Beijing in “a direct conversa-

tion" as "his images continued to receive responses from a constructed 'public' in the media"⁷² and these merely verbal responses did not correspond to any visual communication. If this can make sense from the point of view of the art historian who is looking for evidence through visual agency, from the point of view of intellectual history I see, on the contrary, the human head profile as a new and contemporary version of the "Angel of history" whose face is turned toward the past.

Zhang Dali is proposing the *image* Benjamin talks about: his "dialogue" is not simply a way of re-evoking the past, it embodies, rather, an active and creative process. Zhang's work is a declaration of an intellectual subject position: the use of artistic structural foreshortening⁷³ addresses the issue of historical recollection which refers to the possibility of re-emerging from a previous condition of oblivion. Zhang Dali reopens the wall and catches and guides the eye to look behind the surface (like Benjamin's angel) and raises critical questions about the time, the present, the past, a past which "is not even past" (as William Faulkner pointed out in a quite different context),⁷⁴ and a present which is not past yet. The new constellation formed by the present and the past together contains all the horrifying images of the past but also its unexplored possibilities. "There is no such thing as 'was,'"⁷⁵ that one might consider far away and finally overcome, put behind us once and forever, pretending not to know that the present/past has always the possibility to arise again.

Zhang Dali is an individual voice and the perspective that animates his work does not necessarily lead to ideological consistency, but Zhang Dali, nevertheless, elucidates with his eyes, seeing the dismembered walls as discriminating factors between past and present. His search for "dialogue" indicates a complex resistive subjectivity of a multitude, which reclaims the space: the localization and repetition of his signs indicate the possibility of reappropriation, although only temporarily, of a space which shows (through the wall) a historical dimension with a highly symbolic capital. The human head profile is Zhang Dali's profile but is also the profile of the multitude caught (in China but not only there) in the problematic between catastrophe and progress. Zhang's work points at the connection between the two which appears behind the scenes of "modernization" when we look at the "storm" that has hit and is still hitting China and all of us: "This storm is what we call progress."⁷⁶

The eyes of the angel looking behind constitute a possible beginning of a different dimension of persuasion and political rhetoric. Looking behind, at the past, in a country whose categorical imperative is "to look ahead" (*xiang*

qiankan)⁷⁷ to the glorious future, is the antihistorical practice suggested to me by Zhang Dali. This practice could be dismissed as an attempt to refound a utopian political myth, however it could also be perceived as an operative skill, reflexive of the memory, which opens the space for a possibility to meditate on the past, especially on the recent past, in order to avoid its repetition.

Beginning with the creation of the nation-state system, the function attributed to history has fundamentally been the definition of the criteria of identity through the establishment of a civil calendar and a narrative of the origin. History has been predominantly conceived as undertaking the task to define the essence of the self, to create a codified set of symbols and gestures suitable to answer the question, "Who am I?"

Re-examining the past not in relation to "what we are" or in association to a metaphysics of identity, but as a function of what has been done (to the city, and by extension to its inhabitants) implies the choice of history as a locus, in which we no longer adhere to a prefabricated formula but we remeditate on what has happened to us and we act to achieve a different outcome which is neither guaranteed by any metaphysics nor automatic.

There is no salvific escape in the meditation on history and the past, but perhaps there is a possibility to reinvent, to experiment, and to find new ways to avoid being once again inexorably defeated. Looking at the past through the breach created by Zhang Dali inside the wall alludes to this possibility. Echoing Lu Xun's metaphor of the ironhouse,⁷⁸ I would conclude by saying that only the awakening and awareness of what happened can produce an energy able to reverse the imperative logic of the present, one which mystifies the catastrophe of Beijing's present/past and sells it as progress.

Notes

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¹ Wang Yi, *Yuanlin yu Zhongguo wenhua* (Gardens and Chinese culture) (Shanghai: Renmin chubanshe, 1990). Quoted by Zha Jianying, *China Pop: How Soap Operas, Tabloids, and Bestsellers Are Transforming a Culture* (New York: New Press, 1996), 67.

² I live in Dunkirk, western New York right now. The urban renewal program carried on in the late 1960s in this small city led to the massive demolition of approximately 254 houses and commercial buildings in the downtown area, with the consequent complete loss of historic and urban fabric. See J. A. Chewing, *Dunkirk, New York: Its Architecture and Urban Development* (Dunkirk: Access to the Arts, 1992). The Historic Preservation Act,

passed in the USA in 1966, can be considered an attempt (in many cases posthumous) to put an end to the disasters caused by most urban renewal projects and to suggest exploring preservation possibilities more seriously in urban renewal, such as adaptive reuse of older buildings.

³ Zha, *China Pop*, 67 (italics mine).

⁴ Yang Dongping, *Chengshi jifeng: Beijing he Shanghai wenhua jingsheng* (City monsoon: the spiritual culture of Beijing and Shanghai) (Beijing: Dongfang chubanshe, 1994), 29–33.

⁵ See Nancy Shatzman Steinhardt, *Chinese Imperial City Planning* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999), 169.

⁶ It was born as the result of the adaptation to the natural environment and to the agricultural economy based on the single family.

⁷ See also Zhao Dongri, "Xiandai fazhan he jiucheng baohu" (Modern development and old city preservation), *Jianzhu xuebao* (Architectural journal), no. 4 (1990): 2–6; Zhao Dongri, "Beijing zhanlue fazhan yanjiu" (Studies on Beijing's development strategies), *Zhongguo jianshi* (Building in China), March 1989, 18–22.

⁸ Hwang Ming-Chorng, "Study of Urban Form in 18th Century Beijing" (Master's thesis, MIT, 1986).

⁹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 17–35.

¹⁰ In the West, this conception is typical of graffiti artists: it signified the end of "modern art," conceived as the tradition spanning from the impressionist movement to conceptual art. Zhang Dali still calls his art "conceptual art" (*guannian yishu*). He argues: "In the 1990s, art has transcended the limits of aesthetics (*meishu*). It is not a question anymore of whether something is beautiful or not, my art is conceptual, it asks questions about the basic problem of existence." Lyn Stuart, "Dialogue: The Graffiti Art of 18k," *Beijing Scene* 5, no. 4 (1999): 2.

¹¹ The Chinese word for graffiti is *tuya*, literally "poor handwriting, scrawl, crow tracks" and reverberates with synonymy to *luanxie* and *luanhua* (write or draw in a confused and disordered way).

¹² Mathieu Borysevicz, "Zhang Dali's Conversation with Beijing," *ART AsiaPacific* 22 (1999): 52–58, reprinted in the catalogue *Zhang Dali: duihua he chai* (Zhang Dali: demolition and dialogue) (Beijing: The Courtyard Gallery, 1999), 12.

¹³ This representation of the disquieting head transformed into a hole is reminiscent of "The Hole (*Dong*)," the 1998 Cai Minglian movie, which focused on the dialectic possibility versus impossibility of a dialogue between human beings in another globalized metropolis, Taipei.

¹⁴ Personal interviews with the artist, May–June 1999.

¹⁵ This exhibition was a large group show including 297 works in various mediums by 186 artists. It was the first, and so far the only, national avant-garde exhibition in mainland China.

¹⁶ See Maurizio Marinelli, "Analisi del Movimento Studentesco del 1989: l'Opinione di un Intellettuale Cinese" (Analysis of the 1989 students' movement: the opinion of a Chinese intellectual), in *Se io Fossi il Governo* (If I were the government), ed. Luigi Tomba (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1993), 65–81.

¹⁷ Zhang Dali lived in Bologna, Italy from 1989 to 1995. He initiated his graffiti artwork in 1992. See "He chengshi 'duihua' — Zhang Dali fangtan" ("Dialogue" with the

city — Conversation with Zhang Dali), in *Shi wo!* (It's me), ed. Leng Lin (Beijing: Zhongguo wenlian chubanshe, 2000), 170.

¹⁸ Zhao Guoming, "Weihe qiangshang hua renxiang?" (Why paint a human profile on the wall?), *Beijing qingnianbao* (Beijing youth daily), 18 March 1998, 2.

¹⁹ Francesca Alinovi, *Arte di frontiera* (Frontier art) (Milan: Mazzotta, 1984).

²⁰ Personal interviews with the artist, May–June 1999.

²¹ Personal interviews with the artist, May–June 1999.

²² See interview with Francesca Alinovi in Alinovi, *Arte di frontiera*, 38.

²³ Rammelmee, in the New York art scene of the 1970s, had devised a highly sophisticated theory of "armed letters" known as "iconoclastic panzerism" or "gothic futurism", which reformulated the science of language on extremely intuitive and visionary bases.

²⁴ Personal interviews with the artist, May–June 1999.

²⁵ Nowadays, one expects a greater consciousness of the human impact of building projects on the environment; applying what the scholar Pier Luigi Cervellati suggests in his ideal trilogy on the destiny of Italian cities — building should be conceived as something more than a mere manipulation of the environment to suit one's own need. See Pier Luigi Cervellati, *La città post-industriale, la città bella, L'arte di curare la città* (The post-industrial city, the beautiful city, the art of healing the city) (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2000).

²⁶ See, respectively, Zhao Guoming, "Weihe qiangshang hua renxiang?"; Dao Zi, "Shengtai yishu de wenhua luoji: lü yishujia Zhang Dali yu huanjingde 'duihua'" (The cultural logic behind eco-art: recording the 'Dialogue' of the artist Zhang Dali and the environment), *Zhonghua dushubao* (China readers), 6 May 1998, 14.

²⁷ See *Beijing Review*, 31 January 2000, 12–25. According to statistics, in 1994 the projected floor space to be constructed was 6,537.42 million m², out of which 2,868.48 million m² was completed. The construction sector employed 1,139.14 million people.

²⁸ *Beijing Review*, 20 March 2000, 11.

²⁹ *Beijing Review*, 31 January 2000, 12. Along with the demolition of walls in the post-Mao period we have witnessed a new version of the demolition of "the soy-jar" of traditional culture. This process was perceived in the 1980s as a *conditio sine qua non* to achieve political reforms — see Zhu Weizheng, *Zouchu zhongshiji* (Coming out of the Middle Ages) (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1987); Bo Yang, *Chouloude zhongguoren* (The ugly Chinese) (Taipei: Linbai chubanshe, 1985); Cui Wenhua, ed., *Heshang* (River's elegy) (Beijing: Wenhua sanjie chubanshe, 1988). In reality, after the "nuclear fission" (*liebian*) of June Fourth 1989, the erasure of traditional culture created a vacuum that is quite difficult to fill with anything more consistent than the consumerist culture of disposable goods.

³⁰ Bai Hua and Peng Ning, "Kulian" (Unrequited love), *Shiyue* (October), no. 3 (1979): 140–71, reprinted as follows: in *Shidaide baogao* (Report of the times), 23 April 1981, 5–8; in *Zhengming* (Contend), no. 44 (January 1981): 82–98. See also *Kulian*, Taipei: You shi wenhua shiye gongsi, 1982, 1–87. In April 1981, two years after the publication of *Kulian* (Unrequited love), Bai Hua was harshly criticized for having violated "the four fundamental principles," and the criticism marked the beginning of the campaign against "bourgeois liberalization" (*zichanjieji ziyouhua*). See Richard Kraus, "Bai Hua: The Political Authority of a Writer," in *China's Establishment Intellectuals*, ed. Carol Lee Hamrin and Timothy Cheek (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1986), 185–211.

³¹ I avoid the overworked word "characteristics," commonly used to translate the expression "*you zhongguo tese*."

³² See Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*, 1972–77, ed. and trans. by Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 109–33. “Truth and Power” is an excerpted version of an interview conducted by Alessandro Fontana and Pasquale Pasquino in June 1976, which initially appeared as “Intervista a Michel Foucault” (Interview with Michel Foucault) in Michel Foucault, *Microfisica del Potere* (Microphysics) (Turin: Einaudi, 1977), 3–28.

³³ Zhang Nianchao, “Zuopin xuanyan” (Art declaration), in *Zhongguo xinruiyishu* (China new art), ed. Zhang Nianchao (Beijing: Zhongguo shijieyu chubanshe, 1999), 24.

³⁴ Stuart, “Dialogue,” 3.

³⁵ Zhang, “Zuopin xuanyan,” 24.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ If we consider, as an example, the official speeches of Deng Xiaoping or those of Jiang Zemin we observe the constant repetition of expressions like “*wending*” (stability) or “*jiandingbuyide baochi shehui wending*” (unswervingly maintain social stability) or “*andingtuanjie*” (stability and unity), which sound like a contemporary version of the Confucian concept of “great harmony” (*datong*). See Maurizio Marinelli, “Language Politics and Intellectuals from Yan’an to the XVI Party Congress” (paper presented at the New England Association for Asian Studies 2003 Conference, Harvard University, 26 October 2003).

³⁸ Chinese text in the presentation by the curator Cao Weijun, “Chengshi jianshe yu dushihua” (City construction and urbanization) for the exhibition of Zhang Dali, pamphlet, Beijing sheji bowuguan (Beijing Art Museum), 23 May 1998, reprinted in the catalogue *Zhang Dali: duihua he chai* (Zhang Dali: demolition and dialogue), 47. On this exhibition, see also the review by Karen Smith, “Zhang Dali and Mathieu Borysevicz at Beijing Art Museum,” *Asian Art News*, 8, no. 4 (1998): 79–80. See also Mathieu Borysevicz and Cao Weijun, *Second Wave* (pamphlet, CIFA Gallery exhibition), 1997.

³⁹ Craig Castelman, *Getting up, Subway Graffiti in New York* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984).

⁴⁰ Andrea Nelli, *Graffiti a New York* (Graffiti in New York) (Cosenza: Lerici, 1978).

⁴¹ Yang Fudong and Jiang Zhi, “Kan! Beijing jiedao de tuya” (Look! Graffiti of Beijing’s streets), *Jiedao* (Street), no. 6 (1996): 42.

⁴² Numerous articles appeared in *Shenghuo shibao* (Life times), between 18 and 21 March 1998. See, in particular, Hang Cheng, “Benbao dujia fangdao jietou tuyaren” (Exclusive interview with the street graffiti artist), *Shenghuo shibao* (Life times), 18 March 1998; Xiao Ma, “Jietou renxiang de chuzhong shi yishu” (The original intention of the human head on the streets is art), *Shenghuo shibao* (Life times), 21 March 1998; Lao Mao, “Ta yingxiangle women de shenghuo” (He has influenced our lives), *Shenghuo shibao* (Life times), 21 March 1998, reprinted in the catalogue *Zhang Dali: duihua he chai*, 48. The presentation of this special investigation of Zhang Dali, edited by Hang Cheng, contains the following: “Since the journalist of the newspaper interviewed ‘18k,’ the creator of the head profile, this newspaper has received many phone calls from citizens expressing numerous opinions. At the same time, our journalists have gathered materials from artists from different fields. The focal point at issue is: ‘Is the human head on the streets art or not?’” See Hang Cheng, “Jietou renxiang shibushi yishu?” (Street human portraits: are they art?), *Shenghuo shibao* (Life times), 21 March 1998, 8. See also Jiang Tao, “Jujiao Beijing rentouxiang” (Focus on Beijing street human portraits), *Lantian zhoubao* (Blue sky weekend), no. 1471, 27 March 1998; Bo Maxiu, “Qiangshang de biaoji” (Marks on walls), *Yinyue shenghuobao* (Musical life), 16 April 1998.

⁴³ Dao Zi, "Shengtai yishu," 2.

⁴⁴ Yang and Jiang, "Kan! Beijing."

⁴⁵ See the article by Yu Zong, "Tuliao penhui 'zuopin' nanca-Ping'an dadao you ren tuya" (The "artworks" spray-painted are difficult to clean — there is a graffiti head on Ping'an Avenue), *Beijing wanbao*, April 1997.

⁴⁶ Yang and Jiang, "Kan! Beijing."

⁴⁷ This campaign was first meant to "stress" the political study of Deng Xiaoping's theory and Jiang Zemin's viewpoints (*guandian*) and to lead the Party leaders, at various levels, to keep in line with the Party center. Afterwards, the campaign was extended to the whole nation and eventually expanded to embrace the "stress" on "coordination, quality, and benefit" in economic construction.

⁴⁸ Zhao Xudong and Duran Bell, "Destroying the Remembered and Recovering the Forgotten in *Chai*: A Circular Game between Traditionalism and Modernity in Beijing" (unpublished draft) <<http://orion.oac.uci.edu/~dbell/Chai.pdf>>, last accessed on 28 May 2004.

⁴⁹ Stuart, "Dialogue," 4. In the official press Chang'an Avenue is described as "spacious and clean," *Beijing Review*, 31 January 2000.

⁵⁰ Some people (such as the person interviewed by Yang and Jiang in "Kan! Beijing") thought that Zhang's work had been "done by a group of children that must be brought under control" (*zhe shi yiqun shilaisuihaizi muxianxia, meishi warle, yinggai guanjiao*).

⁵¹ The catalogue for the exhibition had already been published. See *Cong Zhongguo chufa* (Departure from China: a new Chinese art exhibition) (Beijing: Sheji bowuguan, 1999).

⁵² See Frankie Fathers, "Democracy Walls," *Asiaweek*, 23 April 1999, <<http://www.cgi.cnn.com/ASIANOW/asiaweek/99/0423/feat3.html>>, last accessed on 30 June 2004. This article created quite a few problems for Zhang Dali.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ See Cao, "Chengshi jianshe yu dushihua."

⁵⁶ See Yang Lian's disquisition on *zhongguoxing* and *zhongwenxing*, in his essay Yang Lian, "Zhongwen zhi nei" (Inside Chinese language), *Jintian* (Today), no. 1 (1998): 208–12. Chinese culture as *zhongguoxing* is for Yang Lian a state-sponsored ideology, a sociopolitical entity functional to the creation of a prescriptive form of correct citizenship. On the other hand, when Yang Lian discusses Chinese culture in the sense of *zhongwenxing* he indicates — and claims — the possibility of building a personal Chinese culture via the search for a personal language and, in this sense, he leads us back to his forebears, such as Qu Yuan, Tao Yuanming, Li Bo, and Du Fu.

⁵⁷ Italo Calvino, *Le Città Invisibili* (The invisible cities) (Turin: Einaudi, 1972), 29. The translation from the original Italian version is mine. Calvino's work is not only a timeless idea of the evocation of the city but, implicitly, a discussion on the modern city which demonstrates how the crisis of the city of big numbers is the dual equivalent of the crisis of nature.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁶⁰ Walter Benjamin's "On the Concept of History" is often referred to as "Theses on History." From now on, I will refer to this text as the "Theses." The Theses were published for the first time in 1942, it was only in the mid-1970s that they became a normative text, which symbolically marked the "discovery" of Benjamin in the last 30 years. Walter Benjamin, "Über den Begriff der Geschichte" (On the concept of history), in *Gesammelte*

Schriften (Collected writings), ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, with Theodor W. Adorno and Gershom Scholem (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1991), vol. I, 697–98. As for Klee's watercolor, it entered into Benjamin's possession in 1921.

⁶¹ Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* can be found at <http://www.class.uidaho.edu/diversity/paul_klee.htm>, last accessed 12 September 2003.

⁶² The translation is mine, after consulting many translations, and in particular Susan Buck-Morss, *Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1989), 95; Sigrid Weigel, "Thought-images: A Re-reading of the 'Angel of History,'" in *Body and Image Space: Re-reading Walter Benjamin*, ed. Sigrid Weigel with Georgina Paul, trans. G. Paul with R. McNicholl and J. Gaines (New York: Routledge, 1996), 67.

⁶³ Here I refer, in particular, to the image of the wall opened to reveal what is otherwise concealed behind it.

⁶⁴ *Quadraturism* is scenographical projection on ceilings or walls.

⁶⁵ Giovanni Gherardini (1655–1729) was in China during the reign of Kangxi, and Giuseppe Castiglione (1668–1766) during the reigns of Kangxi (1662–1722), Yongzheng (1723–1735), and Qianlong (1736–1795).

⁶⁶ For examples, see the use of central perspective in the works of Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519), Brunelleschi (1377–1446), and Dürer (1471–1528).

⁶⁷ Walter Benjamin, "The Metaphysics of Youth," in *Selected Writings, 1913–1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1996), 6.

⁶⁸ Here I am also referring to other and more recent works such as *Yibaige zhongguoren* (One hundred Chinese), where human beings — and specifically migrants — become the focus of his attention to reconsider the present and the issue of individual identity. See the catalogue Zhang Dali, *Yibaige zhongguoren* (One hundred Chinese) (Beijing: Beijing guaxinda yishu, 2002).

⁶⁹ See Lin Zhu, *Jianzhushi Liang Sicheng* (The architect Liang Sicheng) (Tianjin: Kexuejishu chubanshe, 1996).

⁷⁰ Nevertheless, as Wu Hung demonstrates, the design of Beijing after 1949 reveals in some aspects a distinctive adherence to the old architectural symbolism of imperial city planning. Wu Hung, "Tiananmen Square: A Political History of Monuments," *Representations* 35 (1991): 84–117.

⁷¹ Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 69–78.

⁷² Wu Hung, "Zhang Dali's Dialogue: Conversation with a City," *Public Culture* 12, no. 3 (2000): 749–68, see 758.

⁷³ This is emphasized even further by the prospective dimension added upon deciding to photograph his works.

⁷⁴ William Faulkner, *Intruder in the Dust* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992).

⁷⁵ William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990). Faulkner has elaborated on his idea that "time is a fluid condition" in "Interview with Jean Stein Vanden Heuvel," first published in *The Paris Review* (Spring 1956). A reprint can be found in James B. Meriwether and Michael Millgate eds, *Lion in the Garden: Interviews with William Faulkner, 1926–1962* (New York: Random House, 1968), 255.

⁷⁶ Here I paraphrase Benjamin, "Theses."

⁷⁷ One of the fundamental official mottos of the post-Mao era "*xiang qiankan*," which means "looking towards the future," is a homophone and homotone of the pun "*xiang qiankan*," where the character for "ahead/future" is replaced by the homophone character meaning "money." Referring to this pun, Yang Lian, among others, is referring to postsocialist China dominated by what he calls "the dictatorship of money," as implicitly

opposed to the propagandized "dictatorship of the people" looking forward. See Yang Lian, "Curtains for Culture," *South China Morning Post*, 16 November 1999, originally published in *Index of Censorship*, 5/99.

⁷⁸ Lu Xun (1881–1936), in the Preface to *Nahan* (Call to Arms), his first collection of short stories (1922), wrote: "Imagine an iron house without windows, absolutely indestructible, with many people fast asleep inside who will soon die of suffocation. But you know since they will die in their sleep, they will not feel the pain of death. Now if you cry aloud to wake a few of the lighter sleepers, making those unfortunate few suffer the agony of irrevocable death, do you think you are doing them a good turn?" "But if a few awake, you can't say there is no hope of destroying the iron house." Lu Xun, *Lu Xun yanjiu xueshu lunzhu ziliao huibian, 1913–1981* (A corpus of scholarship and essays on Lu Xun), 6 vols (Beijing: Zhongguo Wenlian Chubanshe, 1985), vol. I (1973), 273. A complete English translation and an excellent introduction can be found in Ha Jin, trans. and intro., *Selected Stories of Lu Xun* (New York: W. W. Norton & C., 2003), 5.

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GLOSSARY

碍市容违法乱写乱画的问题	<i>ai shirong weifa luanxie luanhuade wenti</i> a problem which mars the appearance of the city, a violation, a disordered writing and painting	
保持市容整洁	<i>baochi shirong zhengjie</i>	the maintenance of a clean and tidy city
暴力	<i>baoli</i>	violence
变化	<i>bianhua</i>	change
边缘化	<i>bianyuanhua</i>	marginalization
表情	<i>biaoqing</i>	expression
不安	<i>bu'an</i>	uneasiness and insecurity
拆	<i>chai</i>	to tear down, demolish
拆房子—盖房子	<i>chai fangzi—gai fangzi</i>	demolish houses—build houses
城	<i>cheng</i>	city or wall
城墙	<i>chengqiang</i>	wall of the city
城市的经济生活	<i>chengshide jingji shenghuo</i>	economic life of the city
城市的暴力	<i>chengshi de baoli</i>	violence of the city
城市的发展	<i>chengshide fazhan</i>	development of the city
城市计划改革	<i>chengshi jihua gaige</i>	urban reform plan
城市是社会表现形式	<i>chengshi shi shehui biao xian xingshi</i>	the city is a form of expression of the modern society
城市一直在城市化的过程当中	<i>chengshi yizhi zai chengshihuade guocheng dangzhong</i>	a city is always involved in a process of urbanization
从中国出发	<i>cong Zhongguo chufa</i>	Departures from China
单位	<i>danwei</i>	working unit
对话	<i>duihua</i>	dialogue
改革开放	<i>gaige kaifang</i>	open door policy (reform period)
观念艺术家	<i>gainian yishujia</i>	conceptual artist
个城市变化的一块银幕	<i>ge chengshi bianhuade yi kuai yinmu</i>	a projection screen of the city's modification
隔阂	<i>gehe</i>	estrangement
公众对这个京城涂鸦想象的态度基本是不理解，反感和抵制	<i>gongzhong dui zhege jingcheng tuyu xiangxiang de taidu jiben shi bu lijie, fangan he dizhi</i> the fundamental attitude of the public toward this kind of graffiti in the capital is that they do not understand, they are disgusted, and want to boycott them	
怪诞形象	<i>guaidan xingxiang</i>	weird image
怪物	<i>guaiwu</i>	strange thing
观念艺术	<i>guannian yishu</i>	conceptual art
皇城	<i>huangcheng</i>	the Imperial City
胡同	<i>hutong</i>	tiny alleyways of Beijing
建	<i>jian</i>	construction
流浪艺术家	<i>liulang yishujia</i>	vagrant artist
六四	<i>liusi</i>	June Fourth
乱写乱画	<i>luanxie luanhua</i>	draw and write in a disordered way

内城	<i>neicheng</i>	the inner city
农业化的城市	<i>nongyehuade chengshi</i>	ruralized city
破旧	<i>pojiu</i>	old and shabby
前卫艺术	<i>qianwei yishu</i>	avant-garde
人类在城市中留下印迹	<i>Renlei zai chengshi zhong liuxia yinji</i>	Human beings leave signs in the cities
人头像	<i>rentouxiang</i>	human head profile
三个符号	<i>san ge fuhao</i>	three symbols
三讲	<i>sanjiang</i>	"Three Emphases" campaign
生态艺术	<i>shengtai yishu</i>	ecological art
生态艺术家	<i>shengtai yishujia</i>	eco-artist
视觉语言	<i>shijue yuyan</i>	visual language
四合院	<i>siheyuan</i>	walled compound household
涂鸦	<i>tuya</i>	scrawl, crow tracks, <i>graffiti</i>
涂鸦艺术家	<i>tuya yishujia</i>	graffiti artist
污染	<i>wuran</i>	pollution
下岗	<i>xiagang</i>	to be laid off
下海	<i>xiahai</i>	literally: dive into the sea (to become an entrepreneur)
向前看	<i>xiang qian kan</i>	looking <i>ahead</i>
向钱看	<i>xiang qian kan</i>	looking toward <i>money</i> (being motivated by money)
行为符号	<i>xingwei fuhao</i>	action (or performance) symbols
新锐艺术	<i>xinrui yishu</i>	avant-garde
有意义	<i>you yiyi</i>	it has meaning
有中国特色	<i>you zhongguo tese</i>	with Chinese characteristics (traits)
外城	<i>waicheng</i>	the outer city
制造城市运动	<i>zhizao chengshi yundong</i>	the campaign to produce cities
杂文	<i>zawen</i>	essay
张大力	Zhang Dali	artist's name
这是一种生活化的艺术	<i>zhe shi yizhong shenghuohuade yishu</i>	this is a kind of living art
这太有碍市容	<i>zhe tai you ai shirong</i>	detrimental to the beauty of the city
中国性	<i>Zhongguoxing</i>	Chineseness (state-sponsored ideology)
中文性	<i>zhongwenxing</i>	Chineseness (personal culture)
紫禁城	<i>zijincheng</i>	the Forbidden City
作品是思想表现形式	<i>zuopin shi sixiang de biao xian xingshi</i>	an artistic work is a mode of expression of thought