



改变传统

TRANSFORMING TRADITIONS

CONTEMPORARY CHINESE ART
FROM THE LOGAN COLLECTION

RE-EVOLUTION

Resistance and Regeneration as Process in Contemporary Chinese Art

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Walking through Beijing one finds *hutongs*, narrow alleyways of traditional Chinese courtyard homes, marked with an encircled *chai*, the character for destruction (below). In many ways, this symbol is a metaphor for the dual natures of subversion and regeneration in contemporary Chinese art. Due to its common use during the Cultural Revolution, the symbol still evokes some revolutionary zeal. According to Xudong Zhao and Duran Bell, "when *chai* is written today on the walls of the city, it connects to a thick memory of the excitement of past generations; and it resonates with the proud melodies of a revolutionary age—an age in which people legitimately and enthusiastically sought the destruction of the old world."¹ What has remained unchanged is the Party's ideology of renewal through destruction: in the desire to rearrange everything into this new order; no sympathy is spared for anything or anybody that does not serve this end.



Chai symbol, Beijing, nd

In many regards, the history of modern China is one of continual revolutions and retractions—both physical and ideological. Although the specter of violence was most evident during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) and Tiananmen Square Massacre (1989), the trend continues with contemporary urban displacement and infringements upon human rights. In response, many of today's Chinese artists have embraced destruction as an integral process to reflect upon and subvert official policy. Echoing the political dialectic in contemporary China, their works range from subtle to incendiary and, ultimately, more subversive pieces. Three interwoven threads can be identified in the work of contemporary Chinese artists that correspond to past, present, and possible future cycles of resistance and regeneration in China: the first is an attempt to remold the iconic status of Cultural Revolution imagery; the second reveals ongoing urban demolition and modernization; and a third indicates a growing concern with China's wanton disregard of the human body as an expendable commodity.

Iconoclasm

With the slogan "Turn the old world upside-down and smash it to pieces!" Mao's Red Guards of the Cultural Revolution urged an attack on the 'Four Olds': old culture, old customs, old morals, and old thought. Unrivaled as a reactionary period in recent Chinese history, students destroyed anything with a trace of bourgeois culture, including books, art, and artifacts, as well as people who showed any hints of connection with the "olds." Eventually condemned in the power struggle following Mao's death in 1976, the Cultural Revolution imprinted a legacy of

fear and submission, but also one of anarchic release, upon the generation who lived through its excesses.² Following Deng Xiaoping's post-Cultural Revolution calls for economic reform and restructuring, some of the first openly provocative Chinese artworks appeared in a wave of relative artistic freedom.³ Mao resonated as a symbol of the absurdity of the previous era and many artists found the means to deconstruct his image with a vigor bordering on iconoclasm.

The first critical artistic use of Mao's visage was in Wang Keping's 1978 work *Idol*. In an explicit denunciation of the cult of personality surrounding the recently deceased leader, Wang portrays Mao as Buddha. Carved into a stump as if making a totem pole, he contoured Mao's features to make him appear macabre, yet still recognizable. Wang Guangyi similarly condemns the chairman. In *Untitled Mao Zedong—Red Grid* (1986, right) and *Untitled Mao Zedong—Black Grid* (1988), Wang's cool, conceptual style offers the leader up for critical study by imprisoning Mao behind heavy, gridded lines. Included in the February 1989 Beijing exhibition *China/Avant-Garde*, Wang's *Mao Zedong Grid* series was overshadowed by the nascent use of performance to bring processes of destruction to the forefront. One performance artist, Xiao Lu, contributed a violent work entitled *Dialogue*. Referencing the early student activism that eventually culminated in the massive protests in Tiananmen Square several months after the show, Xiao used a pistol to attack her installation. In a show of renewed government force over the arts, the exhibition was immediately closed down.⁴



Wang Guangyi: *Untitled (Mao Zedong - Red Grid)* 1986. Oil on canvas, 59 x 51 in.

Although public display of dissident art dampened after the exhibition and the government massacres in Tiananmen Square on June 4, 1989, a ferment of private performance works followed in subsequent years.⁵ Most exemplary is Liu Anping, who highlights this subversive trend in his 1992 video and performance work, *Counterrevolutionary Slogan*. Liu's piece recreates the pivotal moment of the Tiananmen protests when demonstrators splashed paint onto the portrait of Mao hanging in the square. Liu was involved in the pro-democracy action and was imprisoned for a year for his role following the protests: with *Counterrevolutionary Slogan* he highlighted his continued disdain for the government's allegiance to Mao's representation, even after it had dismissed his policies.

² Britta Erickson, "A Fleeting Introduction to Contemporary Chinese Art"

³ Although Deng Xiaoping never officially held power as the head-of state, he served as de facto leader of the PRC from the late 1970s to the early 1990s. In response to his calls for economic reform and restructuring—including the development of a market system he termed Socialism with Chinese Characteristics—the government shifted its focus to monetary issues with a resultant loosening of control over the art world.

⁴ Xiao intended *Dialogue* to highlight the disparity of police actions against the politically powerless. She expected to be jailed following her performance yet received only minimal punishment due to her parent's status as party dignitaries, a point she aimed to reinforce through her performance.

⁵ In early 1989, students initiated a hunger strike in Tiananmen Square to request a dialogue with government leaders. Students received no response until June 4, 1989, when tanks stormed the square and the massacre took place. Although General Secretary Zhao Ziyang technically held power; his attempts to support the students' right to protest were undermined by Deng, who worked behind the scenes to give the order to fire.

¹ Xudong Zhao and Duran Bell, "Destroying the Remembered and Recovering the Forgotten in *Chai*: A Circular Game Between Traditionalism and Modernity in Beijing," *China Information*, 19, no. 3 (2005), 3-4.

As instances of government-instigated physical violence against the people grew distant by the mid-1990s, revulsion for the Cultural Revolution dissipated. Yet, the seismic events in Tiananmen Square and the backlash after the crackdown on *China/Avant-Garde* remained strong in artists' memories. Few had a desire to risk their future by making direct commentary on sensitive topics; rather than expressing their discontent through confrontation, many artists instead approached their work with greater humor and cynicism, or reflected upon the events on a more conceptual level. Adopting the style of Western pop artists, for example, Li Shan exploits popular expectations of Mao in his *Rouge Series*. He paints Mao on a vivid, flat background in photorealistic style reminiscent of propaganda posters. Yet, hearkening back to Warhol's silkscreens, Li stylizes Mao's face, plucks his eyebrows, and applies a feminizing layer of lipstick and rouge to render Mao into a coquettish Chinese beauty.⁶ Much of Li's work flirts with issues of homosexuality. In *Mao and the Artist*, 1994, the two suggestively touch shoulders while smirking at the viewer. The oversized, lip-leaved flowers and shared expressions build the erotic aura. By humanizing and feminizing the usually stalwart chairman, Li creates a relationship between their representations and, in the process, challenges Mao's inapproachability. While this work could be read as an adulation of Mao, it likewise mocks the beautifully perfect images of the great leader reproduced throughout China.



Shi Xinning: *Mao and McCarthy*. From the *China After 1949* series, 2006

What has been destroyed often serves to give presence to what remains. In this manner, latent effects of the Cultural Revolution still survive in the official manipulation of history. Shi Xinning skillfully mimics this rewritten history in his 2006 *China After 1949* series, in which he inserts Mao into well-known images from the 20th century. Just as the alteration of images was an everyday act of political propaganda for Communist Party authorities, Shi likewise appropriates the faded tones of hand-colored photographs to add a veneer of authenticity to his paintings. In *Mao and McCarthy* (above), Shi provocatively inserts an image of Mao into a scene of Joseph McCarthy's 1947 House Un-American Activities Committee. He infuses his painting with seriousness, as if he was exactly recording the scene. However, the more Shi plays with authenticity, the

⁶ Li terms this process *yanzhihua* (rouge-ization). Francesca Dal Lago, "Personal Mao: Reshaping an Icon in Contemporary Chinese Art," *Art Journal* 58, no.2 (1999): 58.

Zhang Dali

In *100 Chinese* (2001, page 38), Zhang Dali commemorates the rapid economic transformation of modern Beijing. Women, men, and children are sculpted into a powerful collective of 100 silent figures. Molded from life (see inset), the individual heads document the migration of workers from rural to urban environments, bestowing power upon the powerless. In its multiplicity, *100 Chinese* alludes to historical figural representations such as the Qin Dynasty *Terracotta Warriors* (page 45). In this context, the sculpture extends and transfers the power of the emperor to the lowest class. Zhang Dali's *100 Chinese* champions the individual existence of these workers, asking the viewer to contemplate the human toll of modern progress.

In his *Dialogue* series, Zhang Dali documents the transformation of Beijing through his own form of guerilla intervention. Over the course of a decade, Zhang's graffiti logos spray-painted throughout the old quarters of the city functioned as a ubiquitous witness to buildings marked for destruction. In *Demolition, Forbidden City* (1998, page 36) the viewer receives a glimpse of China's past and suggested impermanence. Zhang Dali captures a moment in time that gives the print an ethereal quality. In *Dialogue* (2007, page 37) his signature profile is crafted in

bright azure neon, a more durable form for his logo. With its commercial associations, the neon alters the logo's original purpose: China is now open for business.

—Meagan Goddard



ing a mask for *100 Chinese*, 2001

greater the sense of irony he creates, especially in this scene where Mao ostensibly chairs a Communist witch-hunt. One could feasibly term Shi's work ironic resistance: he both raises intrigue about historical inaccuracy in China and maintains a sense of humor.

Zhang Dali similarly explores constructs of Communist revisionism in his series *Second History*, from 2006 (right). In this work, he juxtaposes one historical propaganda photograph with its doctored counterpart. In one juxtaposition, the first image depicts Chairman Mao and Vice-Chairman Liu Shaoqi, while in the second Liu has been excised after a fall from power. As with all of *Second History*'s images, both had originally been published in official media. Without participating in the actual alteration of any of the pictures, Zhang stamps them with a fake seal reading "China History Photography." By merely presenting the government's own manipulated history without added commentary, Zhang exposes the distortions of propaganda by allowing what has been written out of history to persist in its absence.

Remaking Cityscapes

Although political ideology remains an effective artistic focus, many artists have chosen to echo recent problems caused by urban redevelopment. At the close of the 1980s, government officials made a drastic shift from a strict state-controlled economy to a hybrid free-market/communist system characterized by rampant reconstruction in the name of modernization. Since implementation of these economic reforms of the early-1990s, the restructuring of China's urban fabric has overtaken even the controversial Three Gorges Dam project as the most visible mark of official violence upon the Chinese populace. During the past fifteen years, many Chinese cities have been undergoing massive, indiscriminate demolition of traditional architecture, often rendering them unrecognizable.

One noteworthy response to such brutal demolition was organized by the Three Man Studio to protest the order to raze the Central Academy of Fine Arts in 1994. The three studio participants—Sui Jianguo, Yu Fan, and Zhan Wang—created a series of site-specific installations entitled *Property Development* that were characterized by direct interaction between the artists and the process of destruction. Sui



Zhang Dali: *At the Second Meeting of the People's Assembly, April 1959*. From the series *Second History*, 2006



Zhang Dali: *At the Second Meeting of the People's Assembly, April 1959*. From the series *Second History*, 2006

created an installation entitled *Ruins* (1995) where he paved over a section of the campus as it was being demolished—in its place he reconstructed an uninhabited classroom with empty rows of desks marked by walls of moveable cabinets. In *Classroom Exercise* (1995) Zhan utilized the debris from the demolition process to create a landslide of rubble flowing in through a classroom window. On top of the wreckage, he placed pink student-painted sculptures of a figure in fetal position to represent displacement. While Yu's project, *Beautiful Scenery*, only indirectly addressed the ensuing demolition, it was perhaps the most critical in its irony. Creating a tourist attraction out of the soon-to-be-demolished building, he constructed a beach replete with sand, toys, and chairs in an empty classroom.⁷



Zhang Dali: Two images from the *Dialogue with the City* series, 1995–1999

Zhang Dali was also shocked by the violent remaking of Beijing he witnessed after a period of exile in Italy. In a 2000 interview with Francesca Dal Lago in *Art Journal*, Zhang describes the city he encountered upon his return: "I lived abroad for a long time and when I returned, I noticed how many physical changes the city had undergone. In the beginning, I was trying to follow the changes. I would take a map and try to retrace them around the city center. After some time I could not follow them anymore; they were too many and too sudden."⁸

While in Italy, Zhang began to experiment with graffiti. Originally unfamiliar with the style, he was intrigued by the artistic interplay that could occur on a painted wall. This concept would fuel his highly charged art-making upon his return to Beijing and also Shanghai. In his *Dialogue* series (1995–1999) Zhang makes large stylized images of his head in graffiti on the walls of condemned buildings, seeking to generate a dialogue with the city (upper left). In some cases he adds the tag AK-47, after the Russian assault rifle, to emblemize the violence gripping the city in its rush to demolish (lower left).

Spurred by the increasing number of buildings marked for demolition in Beijing, Zhang retitled his work *Dialogue/Destruction* (2003–2005)⁹ and hired workers from the construction projects to hollow out the profiles of his graffiti (page 36). Through his interventions, Zhang shadows the larger devastation that occurs around him. In recognition of temporality—Zhang's half-raised wall and his gouged profile are doomed to be completely destroyed before long—he accentuates the

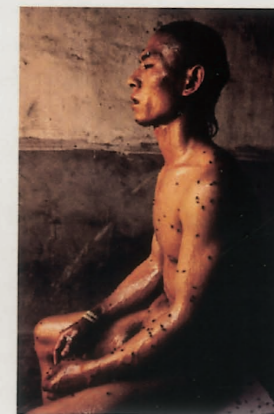


Zhang Dali: from the *Chinese Offspring* series, 2003–05. Installation view

villages with little hope of employment. In *Chinese Offspring*, Zhang creates a metaphor for these living conditions by suspending fifteen life-size cast figures of migrant laborers upside-down from rope tied around their ankles. The multiple figures remind one of livestock in the process of being slaughtered; laborers' lives are at the mercy of others and they feel unable to change this situation. While the body casts look at rest and show no evidence of struggle, the process of hanging jolts us into an awareness of the laborers' expendability. In this work, Zhang addresses the mental and physical violence of labor through figurative disjunction.

While Zhang Dali illuminates the living conditions of a marginal population, Zhang Huan accentuates the vulnerability of the body in adverse social conditions through autobiographical performance. While living in poverty in Beijing's East Village in 1994, he created his watershed performance piece, *12 m²* (right). Taking inspiration from the inferior conditions in which he and much of the artistic community lived at the time, Zhang coated himself with honey and fish oil and sat naked for hours in a public restroom. In a test of extreme endurance, he remained motionless while flies covered his skin, inflicting the abjection of poverty upon his body.¹⁰

Zhang Huan's recent work has continued to explore the intersection between physicality and culture with subtler, yet arguably more powerful references. His monumental sculpture *Berlin Buddha* (2007, page 12) is likely the first high-profile work by a Chinese artist to address the country's contemporary oppression of human rights in Tibet. Taking inspiration partly from the destruction of Buddhist sculptures during the



Zhang Huan: *12 m²*, 1994. Performance, Beijing

¹⁰ The use of autobiography may be a means of resisting political authority while masking any obvious political commentary.

⁷ David Spalding, *Ghosts Among the Ruins: Urban Transformation in Contemporary Chinese Art*, (MA Thesis excerpt, California College of the Arts, 2002), 104-105.

⁸ Francesca Dal Lago, "Space and Public: Site Specificity in Beijing," *Art Journal* 59, no. 1 (2000): 83.

⁹ While in the first phase of *Dialogue* Zhang solely painted his graffiti self-portraits; he later began to take pictures to record both the art itself and the reactions of often unknowing passersby. *Dialogue/Destruction* can be considered the third stage of this series.



Zhang Huan: *Berlin Buddha*, 2007. Installation/performance

Cultural Revolution, Zhang constructed the work from compacted incense ash. As he removed the supports stabilizing the sculpture, the head began to fall and crumble, activating its sudden collapse during the show's opening. The remainder of the body gradually crumbled throughout the course of the exhibition. Due to the equilibrium of Zhang's sculpture and the choice of material inherently bound to deteriorate, disintegration seems the focal point of the work. Yet the lingering smell of incense emphasizes that while the physical body may become victim to violence, the spirit remains. The contrast of two types of destruction—the sudden collapse of the head and the gradual disintegration of the body—might also allude to the changing nature of government violence in Tibet. The brutality of previous decades is now an undercurrent, but government trespasses on human rights continue, albeit hidden from the view of most Chinese citizens. This slow erosion might be more dangerous. Zhang places the visitors in the same position as the Chinese populace: standing by in the face of subtle destruction. While he claims to have been touched by religion, *Berlin Buddha* also implicates the Communist Party's suppression of Tibet—a critical event that is sorely underrepresented in the work of contemporary Chinese artists, most likely from fear of repression.

Cycles of Resistance and Regeneration

The artistic processes we have discussed could generally be considered a subversive response to modern China's haunting ideology of destruction. Many contemporary Chinese artists, however, are creating cataclysmic works that provide little space for regeneration. Zhu Yu's *Eating People* (2005) provides a case in point. In this work Zhu films himself in the process of eating a six-month-old fetus. Although the performance was controversial among the Chinese populace and its broadcast was banned in the United Kingdom, Zhu has been able to continue similarly violent work without Chinese government intervention.¹¹ More complex and subtle works, such as Zhang Huan's *Berlin*

¹¹ Mary Bittner Wiseman, "Subversive Strategies in Chinese Avant-Garde Art," *Journal of Aesthetics & Art Criticism* 65, no. 1 (2007): 110.

Buddha for instance, have been condemned by authorities. This contrast attests that—in the official view—ideological dismantling is far more subversive than art made for the sake of shock value.

As a symbol, the *chai* character painted on condemned structures perhaps most appropriately represents the cycle of destruction in Chinese art today. As contemporary meanings of the word encompass both demolition and rebuilding,¹² they allow the space for subtle resistance by revisiting and thereby renewing old traditions, by means of performance and process-oriented works. Like the encircled *chai*, artists' concerns with ideology, deconstruction, and corporeality continue to both revolve and evolve. We see a new maturity that combines the traditional philosophical principles of yin and yang with a residue of revolutionary dialectics: an ethos of destruction intertwined with a hope for regeneration.

¹² Zhao and Bell, "Destroying the Remembered." 3. The authors state: "The logic of *chai* is expressed ideologically as a dichotomy between *po* (destroyed) and *li* (rebuilt)." In many ways this also expresses why the symbol has performed equally in both the Marxist dialectics of early-Maoism and the continually transforming market Communism of today to promote the dogma of destruction-for-progress.

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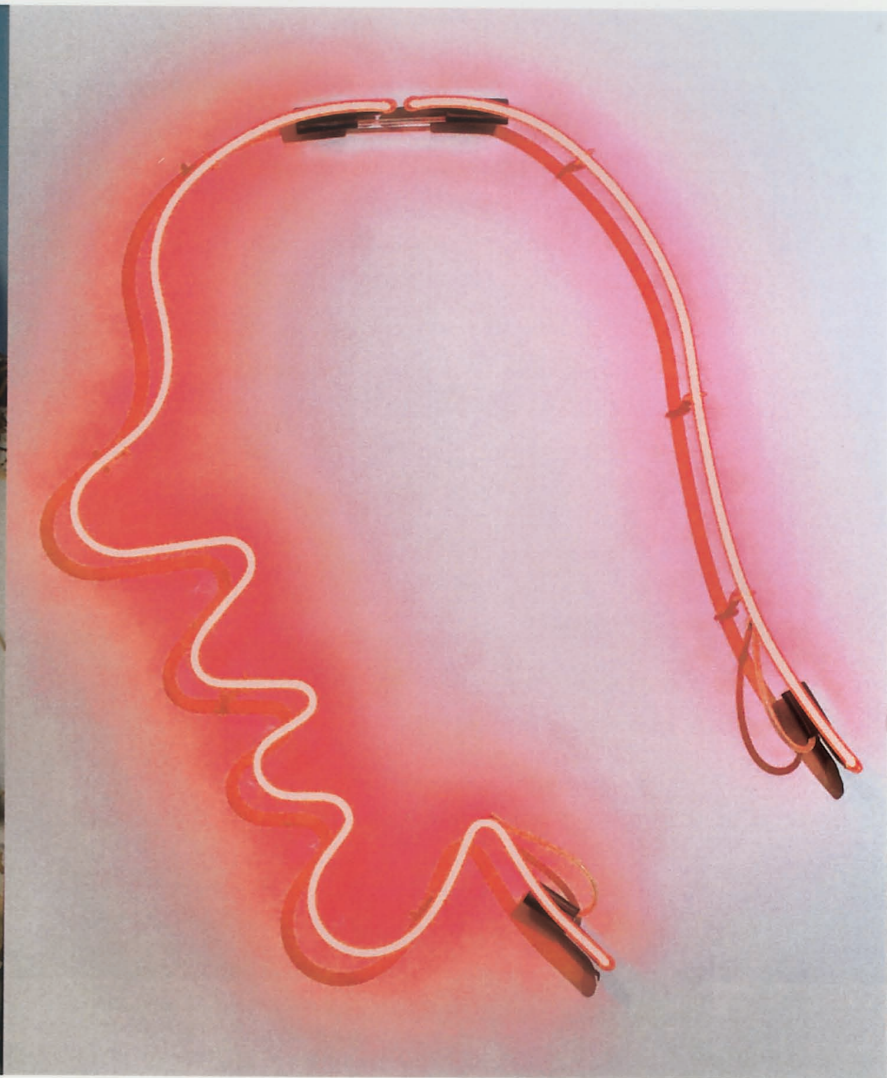
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Zhang Dali: *Demolition, Forbidden City*, 1998
Chromogenic print, 59 x 38 1/2 in.



Zhang Dali: *Dialogue*, 2007 (left, detail). Blue neon mounted on Chromogenic print, 42 x 31 x 4 1/4 in. *Dialogue 1111199*, 1999 (right, detail). Red neon mounted on canvas, 48 x 48 x 5 in.





Zhang Dali: *100 Chinese*, 2001. Synthetic resin, nine pieces, each 11 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 10 x 8 in. each approx.