Reclaiming Chinese Society

The new social activism

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11 Inner city culture wars

Max D. Woodworth

In recent years, China has seen a sharp increase in confrontations between the state and various social actors. The upswing is apparent in key relevant metrics: the number of incidents, the number of participants and the degree of violence (Tanner 2006).[1] But, as alarming as the numbers are for a state fixated on the goal of nurturing a "harmonious society," do these metrics comprise the whole story of resistance in contemporary China? Two cultural events that took place in Beijing between 1995 and 2006 should give us pause, not because they disprove the significance of overt state–society contentious politics, but because they bring into question the concept of resistance in its dichotomizing state–society form. The first is a decade-long graffiti project carried out by the contemporary artist Zhang Dali (b. 1964). The second is a spate of online discussion over the redevelopment of the Qianmen neighborhood in the center of Beijing. On the surface, these episodes have little in common. But in the space below, I attempt to draw attention to their commonalities as parts of the ideological, economic, and political struggle over the physical reconstitution of the city in the context of the deepening penetration of market forces in China. Binding the two is a shared role in the popular expressions of deep ambivalence about the pattern of Beijing's urban development, which began in earnest in the 1990s and remains ongoing. Both exhibit novel forms of participation in a cultural politics that embodies and exemplifies specifically urban modes of interaction with the state and society that have emerged in tandem with the deepening relevance of the market and new technologies in people's daily lives. At the ground level, they are also linked by the citywide experience of demolition and construction uprooting one Beijing to build another suited to the new "new China." By pointing to the substantive similarities and differences contained in these subtle forms of resistance, I hope to expand the scope of inquiry into resistance in China while sharpening the analytical tools currently at our disposal.

The inquiry here is motivated by the social and cultural implications of Beijing's rapid development. At root is the introduction in 1988 of a market-oriented land-lease system permitting the transfer of urban land use rights (Huang 2005). Throughout the revolutionary period, Beijing had been a patchwork of walled state-owned work-unit compounds and low-slung housing areas (Gaubatz 1995b). Commercial activity and movement through the city were limited, as the work unit ostensibly provided life's necessities (Gaubatz 1995a: 80). The introduction

of the land-lease market in 1988, however, changed all that (Fang 2000). It triggered a profit-driven race to realize the exchange value of tracts of urban land, in the process reorganizing local territorial politics around control over urban land and irrevocably altering the city's physical landscape (Hsing 2006). Because land continues to be state-owned, as enshrined in China's Constitution, fortuitous state agents holding urban parcels of land were in a position to dispossess and dislocate upwards of a million people and engage in quintessentially capitalist rent-seeking behaviors (Zhang and Fang 2004). Exacerbating matters was Beijing's "Old and Dilapidated Housing Renewal" (危旧民房, ODHR) policy implemented in 1990 (Zhang and Fang 2003; 2004: 287). The policy's stated intent was to preserve the city's historic courtyard housing architecture – the city's famed *siheyuan* and *hutongs*. In practice, it empowered local developers to clear whole neighborhoods by declaring them old and dilapidated beyond repair and further justifying the move as integral to improvement of safety, sanitation, and intra-city circulation (Zhang 2002; Fang 2000: 54–5; Wu 1999: 32–5). The liberalized land-lease market and the ODHR policy were instrumental in reducing the total residential floor area in traditional *hutong* neighborhoods citywide from 17 million square meters to 3 million square meters between 1983 and 2005 (Hon 2006). Where *hutongs* were demolished, all too often, high-end condominiums and office space sprung up in their place. Skyrocketing land values resulting from speculative real estate investment meant that resettlement in their original neighborhood was far from guaranteed for displaced low-income residents. As a result, by 1998, an estimated 100,000 households uprooted from their homes had not been resettled. Demolition and relocation, a process dubbed "*chaiqian*," became a dominant motif of Beijing life in the 1990s and the early 2000s.

In response to the mounting tide of *chaiqian* beginning in the early 1990s, Beijing's residents engaged in individual and collective lawsuits, circulated petitions, registered complaints in the "letters and visits" (*xinfang*) system, and, on occasion, physically resisted eviction, thus enduring the social stigma of being labeled "nail households" (*dingzi hu*).[2] The varied dynamics of such protest actions in China have received growing attention in recent years. However, studies of contention and resistance in China display a reluctance to step outside the boundaries of the phenomenon of the social movement in the search for evidence of popular agitation. According to common accounts, resistance gels around class or regional identities, or through shared interests often revolving around disappearing welfare entitlements, pay arrears, commodification of urban and rural land, or, more recently, environmental crises (Hurst 2004; O'Brien 2002; Jing 2003; Thireau and Hua 2003).

Yet, as important as overt resistance undoubtedly is, it should not blind us to actions responding to the development process that occur out of sight, without attribution and without clear goals. The examples provided in this chapter are precisely such types of resistance. These actions also lack organizational structures that would typically serve to articulate coherent grievances and claims. Further, the participating actors have formed community-based identities, as opposed to class-based or clan-based identities, through which their resistance is expressed. This

chapter therefore seeks to broaden the realm of inquiry in two directions: first, to identify types of actors who have slipped under the radar; and, second, to analyze modes of resistance that may not be readily diagnosed as radical or oppositional. By expanding the scope of resistance from the protest march, the lawsuit, the riot, etc. to include these isolated and decentralized modes of resistance, it is possible to achieve an appreciation of the means by which people conduct themselves neither as clear antagonists of the Chinese state nor as its quiescent subjects, but rather straddle both positions through subtle cultural politics. The modest claim here is that Zhang's graffiti and Internet discussion about Qianmen are elements in a fluid and unpredictable determination of a peculiar "regime of truth" (Foucault 1984: 74).

The approach in this analysis begins by accepting that resistance may be a spontaneous, *ad hoc* practice with objectives that are neither always clear nor verbalized and with targets that shift over time. Moreover, resistance may be "individual or collective, widespread or locally confined" (Hollander and Einwohner 2004: 536). James C. Scott's notion of the "weapons of the weak" is a clear reference point for this type of theoretical framework (1987). Resistance in such cases is subtle and wrapped in protective layers of ambiguity and plausible deniability. A fundamental difference from Scott's conception exists, however. The participants in both cases are not "weak." Zhang is a relatively wealthy artist with international connections and a global reputation. His art is closely followed by collectors and by students of Chinese art around the world. Likewise, Internet users in China must be counted among the country's privileged. Access to the Internet and to its related technologies, while widespread in aggregate terms, is heavily skewed toward a young, urban, educated and affluent demographic slice (Meeker, Choi, and Motoyama 2004). These are the winners in China's new social stratification, not its losers. Additionally, neither mode of resistance presented here fully constitutes what Scott terms an "everyday form of resistance." Despite the covert character of graffiti and Internet discussion, the results of both are intentionally loud and spectacular, while the grievances and claims expressed are either incoherent or absent.

Most crucially, neither case represents a movement centered on achieving specific desired outcomes. This chapter rejects the presumed central importance of outcomes in order to take seriously acts that are not part of linear state–society contentious politics, but which operate as stand-alone, disconnected moments. Outcomes, or results, are secondary to the acts themselves.

Unpacking these two contemporary social phenomena to discern their roles amid Beijing's dramatic transformation raises a number of critical questions: What, precisely, is the nature or value of oppositional content in indirect and vague modes of resistance, and how are we certain of this? How might we reconceptualize resistance to include both mundane and extraordinary acts? And what can be said of resistance if neither grievances nor claims are cogently articulated? The cases here are discrete examples chosen as much for their poignancy as their variety. An analytical comparison of four related aspects of each serves to highlight the critical points proposed here. First, in graffiti and in online discussion, communication occurs mostly behind a veil of anonymity, which can be self-referentially employed

to highlight and protect the actor while adding additional layers of embedded critique. Second, both display manipulations of the unique characteristics of the chosen medium to maximize the effect of either activity. Third, both play instigating roles in a type of society-wide "dialogue." Finally, the oppositional stance of both forms is consciously indirect, but no less confrontational for being so. Targets and interlocutors are unclear, though the framing of state agents as antagonists emerges as an unmistakable theme. Grievances are nebulously articulated, claims are undefined, and tactics dominate strategy. In this fashion, highly nuanced forms of publicly visible critique function as amorphous parts of a front in the battle over ideas, culture, and practices.

Bombing Beijing

Zhang Dali's ten-year graffiti project, titled *Dialogue* (*Duihua*), in which he spray-painted thousands of heads throughout Beijing, came to an end in 2005.[3] During the term of the project, he painted almost exclusively on the broken ruins of demolished walls, or on walls in residential areas marked with a spray-painted Chinese "*chai*" character – the public signal that the building was slated for demolition. The heads were simple, painted in profile with a single black line and disproportionate features – bulbous forehead, rounded lips and chin – that lent them an odd, cartoonish appearance. Yet their stark minimalism belied the systematic and intense effort invested in their production. Moreover, by force of their numbers, their size (about 2 m by 2 m), and the strangeness of the abstract image, the heads pried their way into the public's perception, defying passersby to ignore them and raising questions about their cryptic provenance and communicative intentions. But the heads offered no answers to any of the questions they inevitably posed: Who painted them? What do they mean? Why paint on demolition sites? The graffiti was, in fact, a carefully devised conceptual enterprise designed to jolt the senses and stir reflection on the interconnected processes of demolition, relocation and urban construction. In this, the project was immensely successful, drawing domestic and international attention that helped position Zhang as a leading talent in Chinese contemporary art by the end of the project's lifespan.[4]

Anonymity and graffiti

In the first three years of painting *Dialogue*, Zhang carried out his work strictly under cover of darkness, moving about the city at night and dismounting from his bicycle at sites chosen during daytime scouting missions. Painting at night was a tactical choice to avoid detection by police and vigilant neighborhood committee members. Because graffiti of this scale and scope was unprecedented in Beijing, it was unclear what reaction authorities would have to its introduction to the urban space. The artist had first experimented with graffiti in Italy, where he lived for six years following the Tiananmen Square movement, and so was conscious of the genre's criminalization in the West. There was little reason to assume Beijing authorities would adopt a tolerant stance toward graffiti. Anonymity also allowed

Zhang to quietly observe the public reaction to his heads for three years before he openly claimed the graffiti as his own serial art project. He would often return in the daytime to photograph his graffiti *in situ* and observe people's reactions to the heads (Wu 2000; Marinelli 2004; Zhao and Bell 2005).[5] Anonymity was also an embedded aspect of *Dialogue* at the conceptual level. Zhang would leave the heads either without attribution or with tags reading "AK-47" or "18K" in reference to the violence and materialism that he found to be fueling the destruction/construction cycle in Beijing (Rouse 2001). More importantly, the lack of attribution left open for viewers the imprinting of multiple personal layers of interpretive significance. In their unattributed and simple, almost iconic form, the heads offered little indication that they, in fact, were pieces of high-concept art.

Manipulation of genre and media

Zhang's manipulations of media were both premeditated and multifaceted. By 1998, when *Dialogue* had become a fixture of the urban scenery, a magazine titled *Jiedao* and the official *Beijing Youth Daily* had reported on them with an admixture of curiosity and condemnation (Yang and Jiang 1996; Yu 1998). As a formally trained artist, Zhang counted his graffiti among the "serious" Chinese experimental art blossoming in the 1990s, unquestionably above vandalism and not simply a localized facsimile of Western graffiti, as some critics suggested.[6] In the graffiti genre he saw rich conceptual possibilities thus far unexplored in China. He is also a shrewd artist adventurous enough to bait authorities and the public into reacting to his project. The first media reports about the heads indicated that *Dialogue* was, indeed, drawing attention, but Zhang admitted to being consternated by the coverage's admonishing tone.[7] Even the dean of his alma mater, the elite Central Fine Arts Academy, had been quoted as saying the graffiti "sullies the face of the city (*pohuai shirong*) and cannot be called art" (Jiang 1998). To set the record straight and to stoke the fire of an incipient controversy, Zhang accepted an anonymous interview with the small newspaper *Life Times* (*Shenghuo shibao*) in 1998 (Hang 1998a) and, over the following year, gradually revealed his full identity in subsequent interviews with local and foreign media. By going public, *Dialogue* rapidly overcame its original cryptic obscurity and became widely and publicly debated in the culture pages of local publications as "conceptual art," "performance art," and "ecological art," receiving the media-bestowed imprimatur of artistic legitimacy and shielding him from further branding as a miscreant (Douzi 1998; Hang 1998b; Hang 1998c). Zhang's calculated interaction with domestic media helped to transform public perceptions of *Dialogue* from a matter of public order into a vaguely dialogic controversy over artistic practice. It also served to spur discussion about the role of the contemporary artist as social critic in China, and about Beijing's development process.

Media coverage of *Dialogue* between 1998 and 2000 sustained the controversy generated by the graffiti and provided Zhang with abundant free promotion. It further provided a platform to explain to the public that the heads were intended as a provocation to the city's residents to talk about the process of redevelopment. The

considerable attention his graffiti drew spurred the organization of a solo exhibition titled "Demolition and Dialogue" at Beijing's prestigious Courtyard Gallery in November–December 1999, which prompted yet more coverage in domestic and foreign media and generated sales of movable art pieces. As the project evolved, Zhang became pointedly self-conscious of his position as a media subject and deliberate in his self-branding as a brazen insurgent. He began, for example, to wear a balaclava or gas mask while being photographed next to his spray-painted heads. In photos for his solo exhibition catalogue, Zhang stands with spray-paint cans in hand, arms thrusting skyward in a victory pose atop a demolished wall on which is painted one of his heads. Through the mediation of the camera, Zhang's guerilla poses served two connected functions. First, they provided *Dialogue* with special valence on the global art market, where collectors are poised for signs of Chinese grassroots insurrection post-1989. Conscripting the global art market in his project therefore provided a layer of protection; authorities would need to weigh the benefits of repressing the artist against the costs of his likely lionization in international media if they resorted to such measures. Second, while courting media attention and the global market, Zhang was genuinely flirting with the law, as the legality of painting graffiti on buildings slated for demolition was not assured. Zhang's guerilla poses therefore served both to signify the deviant character of his act and to highlight it in bold for authorities and the buying public to see. Somewhat ironically, local police who eventually tracked Zhang down were flummoxed by his explanations of his art and were disinclined to punish him.[8] Nevertheless, the perception of illegality is as integral to the art's oppositional character as its actual juridical legitimacy.

Dialogue *as dialogue*

The heavy reliance on the media as a platform to explain and mold perceptions of his graffiti is emblematic of Zhang's concerted attempt to realize the dialogic (and titular) purpose of his project. The graffiti was inspired by what he described as the human, environmental, and cultural tragedies resulting from the transformation of the city and the urgency of the need to discuss the process openly and publicly (D. Zhang 2002).[9] According to Zhang, reluctance to discuss the process provided tacit approval to developers, who were frenetically reconfiguring Beijing's urban space. "In China, violence exists in the space between convention and numbness," Zhang once remarked of the public's alleged abetting of Beijing's development process (2000). Wu Hung has noted that Zhang's proposed dialogue was stilled at best. Yet it is precisely the open-ended quality of the graffiti and Zhang's photos of the heads, as well as the multidirectionality of the subsequent discussion about the graffiti, that provide the art with much of its destabilizing strength and unpredictability (Wu 2000). Dialogue occurred not merely as a linguistic phenomenon between interlocutors, but as interactions that included the image, the viewer, the public, and the urban space. It was a dialogue composed of images, ideas, speech and text. Resistance resided in the fluidity of discussion and interpretation, not in the articulation of a transparent "message" from artist to viewer.

Indirect attacks

In the details of its execution and content, *Dialogue* constitutes an indirect assault on local authority. Its critique is deeply couched in the gray zones of innuendo and inference. Though Zhang occasionally singled out the municipal government in interviews and critics noted the art's relation to urban renewal, the heads do not speak for themselves. It is important, in other words, to also underscore the untraceable conclusions about the heads reached by individual viewers. *Dialogue* does not enlist viewers into a specific or narrow program. Thus, a special valence of the art is its invitation to heterogeneous interpretation. At the same time, however, interpretive mediation is not entirely random, as the construction of meaning through abstractions is a productive process that must contain itself within some shared parameters. Among the shared assumptions on the territory of everyday life in Beijing where *Dialogue* was produced are the socio-political relevance of the demolition site and the destabilizing impact of a lingering human presence in those sites. Emerging amid these localized sensibilities, the viewing experience would likely have fostered connections between *Dialogue* and the extremely visible process of demolition. But the connections and subsequent judgments are impossible to gauge. Therefore the art's subversive aspect is also partially due to the implication of the viewer in his or her recognition of contentious meaning in the abstract design, for to recognize an oppositional stance is to participate in it indirectly as well.

Furthermore, the substance of Zhang's core critique that was the original intent of the graffiti, namely the intensified socio-economic disparities exposed by the systematic eviction of residents from their homes through the commodification of Beijing's urban land, was apparent to many who were drawn into the public debate and was reflected in the tenor and content of domestic media reports and art reviews of *Dialogue*. Hence, the media and members of the public interviewed for print and TV reports were unwittingly recruited as proxies in the generation of discussion openly denunciatory of Beijing's particular mode of urbanization.

Fighting online over Qianmen

At nearly the same time that Zhang ended *Dialogue*, in 2005, controversy was beginning to heat up over the redevelopment of the Qianmen neighborhood, one of the city's famous historic districts, which had evolved in the reform era into a buzzing petty commerce and low-rent housing zone. Due to its central location immediately south of Tiananmen Square, the neighborhood is a prime tract of urban land, but its official historic designation, high population density and the large number of privately owned homes at the site restrained the tide of development sweeping over the city beginning in the 1990s.[10] However, the barriers to redevelopment of the area were gradually lifted between 2003 and 2006 through a combination of administrative and policy maneuvers. The release of the Chongwen District's 11th Five Year Plan for economic and social development set the tone by explicitly urging authorities to develop the area as a commercial, tourist, culinary

and leisure culture market with the aim of "reinvigorating the prosperity of the Qianmen Avenue commercial center" (BMCUP 2002). Soon after, the district government implemented the controversial policy of "separating people and houses" (*renfang fenli*) billed in official media as the "new thinking" on redevelopment in areas with acknowledged heritage value (Li 2006). Under the policy, residents are first relocated with compensation money, which they can put toward commodity or rental housing. Once local residents are relocated, "experts" then inspect vacated homes to determine whether they are to be restored or demolished. Beijing's Municipal Standing Committee, the city's top administrative body, in 2003 had declared that no traditional courtyard homes, or *siheyuan*, would be demolished in Qianmen (Nan 2004). But media reports hinted at extravagant development plans from which the lower-income residents of the area would almost certainly be excluded. *Southern Weekend* reported in October 2006, for example, that a residential project in Qianmen featured lavishly renovated *siheyuan* homes estimated to cost between 10 and 50 million yuan (Nan 2004). Despite the media chatter, verifiable information on the area's redevelopment plans was scant. In its absence, people turned to the Internet to speculate about the changes, to vent against developers, and to argue with those whom they viewed as providing unqualified support to development plans.

The study sample here is limited to discussion about Qianmen on two Web forums: bbs.oldbeijing.net (Site A) and house.forum.com.cn (Site B). Both sites are themed on real estate and urban redevelopment in Beijing." As controversy spread in 2006 when demolition crews closed in on Qianmen, the neighborhood's redevelopment became a subject of heated debate in these two sites. The topic was among the most popular on both sites and each received thousands of page views and posted commentaries. Discussion was driven by questions of both parochial and national interest: What was going to happen to Qianmen? Who was behind the changes? Will the historic neighborhood go the way of so many other Beijing neighborhoods? And if so, should anyone care?

Anonymity and the Internet

On both sites, the common practice, as elsewhere on the Internet, is for the authors of forum posts to cloak their identities behind aliases. Registration for either site is simple and does not entail the provision of personal information. New registrants select an alias, which can be anything within given length restrictions. They are often English words, as in "jams," or vague titles, as in "*hutong aihao zhe*" ("lover of *hutongs*"). Only a relatively tiny number provide a full Chinese name and even these are not guarantees of a definitive identification of the author. Character names from *Outlaws of the Marsh* are popular, for example. In the Chinese context, where supervision of Internet content is an understood reality, the safety afforded to the authors by posting comments anonymously lowers the impulse to self-censor and adds a layer of opacity to their online commentary. Two aspects of anonymity online are salient to this discussion. First, the uncertain identities of forum participants mean that claims leveled against the state from these sites have

little expectation for an official reply or redress of grievances. Claims are primarily emotional outbursts and are not made with obvious political motives. Second, without the specter of repression, anonymity invites provocative speech that baits other participants into discussion, thereby broadening its scope and raising its intensity level. The rhetorical excesses richly evident on these sites provide a rough measure of the extreme limits of public expression in China.

Manipulation of media and genre

The selection of aliases in online discussion sites is indicative not only of the tendency toward masking identities in the online space, but also of the awareness that the technologies provided online alter the dynamics of communication in substantive ways. Forum participants in both sites, for example, actively engage in a set of practices that exploit site architecture and the downloadable and uploadable nature of digital content. In Site B, contributors are able to upload photos to their posts so that interaction becomes based on textual and visual cues. For example, a photo posted to the site features a defaced propaganda banner in the Qianmen neighborhood that originally read: "Revive the appearance of the old city" (*zaixian gudu fengmao*). In the defaced banner, the "*wang*" radical of the "*xian*" character was cut out by a vandal so that the sign instead reads: "Goodbye, appearance of the old city" (*zaijian gudu fengmao*) (Zhang 2006). In this ironic intervention, the communicative intent of the propaganda slogan, historically a reliable instrument of the party-state, is overturned first by an unknown vandal and then again by a Web user who pasted the photo online for view by a far larger number of people than would normally have chance to witness the original sign.

The capability to copy and paste information for rapid and uncontrolled dispersal also generates a digital paper trail of the state's interaction with its subjects. On Site B, a forum participant used the site as a means to expose the government to public scrutiny over the Hongshan Jiayuan housing project, which was intended as a relocation site for displaced Qianmen residents. Online discussion over the housing project reached a boil when one participant posted to the site the following alleged response to a complaint registered through the *xinfang* system with the Chongwen District Government:

I sent a letter to the municipal letters and visits office asking about Qianmen. The Chongwen District Government wrote back. This is what they wrote:

You expressed an opinion regarding the Hongshan Jiayuan project proposed for the eastern section of Qianmen. The district government has already reached a conclusion on this topic, which is provided below:

To preserve the ancient appearance of the city and improve the living standards of the people, the district government has already raised 8 billion yuan to use toward improvements of the housing situation. With the support and help of the municipal government, the district intended to use the Hongshan Jiayuan project as a relocation site for displaced residents. But, due to the non-unified thought of the residents, and exorbitant compensation demands

> by some residents, the demanded amount has surpassed that provided for in relevant municipal regulations. As a result, the district government is left without other options but to abandon the plan to begin work on the Hongshan Jiayuan. – Chongwen District Government. (777doudou777 2006)

Access to the Internet and the use of its basic functionality provides the capability to hold local state agents under a microscope in unprecedented ways. Further, the public revelation of the sharp tone in the local government's interaction with residents ratchets up the tenor of discussion by feeding a perception of victimization at the hands of venal local officials and their business partners.

Creative manipulations of computer technologies allow Internet users to take jabs at the state from safe territory. They also seek to compound the impact of their posts by packaging their statements more cleverly with humor, irony and other textual or visual elements, or indulging in splenetic outbursts peppered with aggressive language.

Dialogue online

Discussion in both online sites about Qianmen is fluid and non-linear. *Non sequiturs* and tangential remarks are common, as are stand-alone statements, such as: "My country is a construction site. It's called *chai-na!*" (Shanren Shuizhi 2004). The Internet is particularly prone to this practice, as the interaction it fosters takes place outside the physical real-time environment. Consequently, "conversation" within the forums often takes the form of a string of unrelated angry outbursts and conversation-ending rejoinders. Nonetheless, forum participants quote other authors by copying and pasting previous comments and then replying to these in their own posts. Furthermore, the chronological arrangement of posts provides for participants the impression of engaging in textual call and response that can approximate dialogue under certain conditions, especially in popular discussion threads where comments are uploaded with high frequency. The fit of online discussion into the strict definition of dialogue as "a conversation carried on between two or more persons" (OED) is perhaps uneasy in most cases online. Yet an undeniable collective textual interaction occurs in online debate over Qianmen that is highly charged and supremely aware of being publicly visible.

Indirect attacks from the virtual space

In contrast to Zhang's graffiti, Internet fulmination about Qianmen is built upon the participation of multiple actors. Contributors to each site number in the hundreds, while page views and registered users reach into the thousands. But, despite their numbers, forum participants do not form a coherent group whose opinions are voiced from a physical or clear ideological position. The attacks on municipal institutions and scathing online critiques of Qianmen's redevelopment process are launched from the ether of virtual space and from behind combined layers of dissimulation. But because few of the forum participants claim to be residents of

Qianmen, their discontents are voiced in generalized terms as people concerned about the transformation of the city. Opinion is not unanimous on either site. Some forum participants claim strong support for aggressive development policies. However, for the majority of forum participants, the redevelopment of Qianmen is a moral litmus test of the municipal and district governments' ability to protect and promote the interests of the city's vulnerable populations.

Resistance and the shifting regime of truth

In *Dialogue* and in online discussion about the redevelopment of Qianmen, expected or desired outcomes are not elements in the expression of resistance. Indeed, neither form provides explicit or coherent claims against state agents for redress of perceived injustices. Participants in both cases became engaged in non-linear, multidimensional modes of resistance that fit uncomfortably within a simple state–society binary of contentious politics. Through tactical combinations of tailored anonymity, manipulations of media and genre, and indirectness, the oppositional extent in both cases was the public expression of disgust with the methods and results of development in Beijing. They represent creative, decentralized, and unpredictable emotional release against urbanization in Beijing.

Resistance of this nature may be attributable to the context of contentious action in post-1989 China, where overt dissent carries risks that are difficult to foresee but are presumed to be high. Adapting to this context, modes of resistance that walk a careful line between dissent and approved forms of public expression are common. Kevin O'Brien and Li Lianjiang have observed this tendency in their studies of what they dub "rightful resistance" in peasant protests in which participants adopt the language of the state as a cover for holding state agents to account on a range of abuses (2006). Similarly, Ching Kwan Lee has noted among laid-off and retired industrial workers the rhetorical evocation of Mao as an inviolable symbol of national resistance to injustice and oppression in order to press claims against the state (2002). Such tactical ingenuity serves three primary functions: (1) to bolster the claims pressed by those aggrieved, (2) to draw attention to the resistance as it takes place, and (3) to increase its longevity while state agents determine how best to handle the claims made against it.

Other creative and highly individualized modes of resistance have also been traced in forms of cultural production and expression. Patricia M. Thornton points to ironic discursive outbursts that display cunning negotiations of precarious conditions for mounting resistance in China (2002a; 2002b). The "poetic protests" she uncovers take the form of cheekily phrased door couplets and politico-religious Falungong texts through which people frame grievances and form oppositional identities. But the perceived imperative to link disorganized and highly individualized modes of resistance to grander forms of overt opposition is powerful, as when Thornton states: "the very threshold of dissent can be read as a site of political struggle in which inchoate interests and embryonic identities may be tested and tempered prior to more overt forms of collective action" (2002b: 600).

I have followed Thornton's lead in investigating isolated and creative forms of

resistance, but wish to de-privilege any link to organized or overt contention in order to approach resistance from the angle of cultural politics. Specifically, by decoupling resistance from social movement outcomes, the case studies presented here may be regarded not merely as discrete tactical means employed within a broader dynamic of social struggle, but as ends in themselves. It is certainly true that graffiti and the Internet have, in a variety of settings, been employed in the process of social mobilization and in framing grievances against states. But in the context of today's global culture of high visibility and spectacle, the tactic of resistance can quickly embody and, indeed, become the broader strategy. In other words, the strategy is for the tactic to be seen.[12] The seemingly insatiable appetite for the new and the spectacular, and the ability of more media outlets to meet that demand, establish conditions under which small actions gain a visibility entirely out of proportion to their size and the resources of those who created them. The cases here show that for actors clever enough and properly positioned to harness this dynamic, the articulation of a political or social agenda and the securing of redress are superfluous. Neither case is centered on extraction of quantifiable, tangible entitlements or new rights and privileges from dominant sources of power. Rather, they provide evidence of a complex nudge and jostle over the delineation of culture, the throwing of individuals' weight into the unpredictable struggle over China's shifting regime of truth. Though this struggle occurs mostly in the silent background of quotidian life and explodes into the forefront only at exceptional moments, the implications of this perpetual shifting impinge on daily life's every detail.

By spotlighting the "regime of truth," Michel Foucault aimed to demystify the sources of political and cultural power in ways directly relevant to this discussion. Two propositions guided his thesis: "Truth is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements;" and "Truth is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it" (1984: 74). Power is vested not simply through structures and political processes, in other words, but is formed in a continuous and multifronted battle waged through small and large acts over control of resources, to be sure, but also over ideas and their circulation. Power and truth mutually reaffirm and reinforce each other by changing, shaping, and dominating the terms of public debate. Seen this way, challenges to commonly held truths constitute direct assaults on power and its attached resources, while efforts to upset power include, as a goal and as a means, the overturning of common-sense truths. In China, as elsewhere, dominion over the production of truths is always unstable and jealously guarded. Yet the persistence of party control over most media, the massive investments in monitoring and controlling content on the Internet (August 2007), and the continued presence of crude propaganda on public billboards and walls point to text and representation as crucial parts of the currency of party power. However, the empowerment of new social actors, including Zhang and online forum participants, as a result of market and technology penetration, indicates that the state has been joined on the ideational playing field by more robust players than it has previously faced. It is here that the online discourse over Qianmen and

Dialogue subtly challenge the ideological basis for the process of "accumulation through dispossession" that characterizes the redevelopment of Beijing since the 1990s (Harvey 2006: 90–5).

This is not a minor battle, nor are the stakes insignificant. Official appeals to "modernize" the city are intensely seductive and conceal a logic that posits "development" as the solution to its own social costs. This paradoxical twist is attributable to local state legitimacy having been recast as the capability to deliver urban development, and to extravagant state-engineered displays of the city's progress along the modernization path.[13] In subtle and not-so-subtle ways, connections are made in a multiplicity of media between urban development, the benefits of which are wildly uneven in their distribution, and national wealth and power, thereby imbuing the city's modernization project with the emotional urgency of patriotic passion. The link between urban and national development is richly apparent in the volleys of online discussion over Qianmen's redevelopment, where voices in favor of wholesale redevelopment are quite numerous, and Deng Xiaoping's maxim that "development is the only hard principle" is offered as evidence of the wisdom of "development." It is in this atmosphere that obstructions on the path toward a certain brand of "modernity" are routinely identified, labeled, and condemned to the periphery of local culture. Thus are eviction resisters affixed the pejorative label "nail households." In the same way, Zhang's art is condemned as "sullying the face of the city" and online dissenters to urban redevelopment face scathing rebukes that question their patriotism.

Both cases presented here provide evidence of daring participation in resistance to development as "the only hard principle." Zhang's graffiti project entailed a self-conscious positioning of the artist as an antagonist of the local state's claims to monopoly over urban space and its representation. Zhang operated at the boundary of legal norms, strategically and surreptitiously placing his heads in locations that would draw attention to the city's condemned structures, while also providing for himself a degree of protection against accusations of defacement of property. The act of painting and the media-driven controversy it generated elevated *Dialogue* from an isolated outburst to become a sustained public critique through which people were lured into contemplation of the bedrock of Beijing's development-first ideology. To ask whether his art held the bulldozers at bay is to miss the larger point that the critical questions posed by the project are significant simply for having been raised. The same applies to the virtual space of the Internet, where dissatisfaction over Beijing's urban development policy is debated at length. Despite the demonstrated limits of the Internet in fostering the ferment of democratic polities, it is nonetheless a valuable space where the state's monopoly over representations of urban development is broken down. It is here that, through multidirectional and polyvocal debate, contributors to online discussion expose injustices and contradictions resulting from the process of accumulation through dispossession. The online debate over Qianmen and *Dialogue* became widely remarked phenomena whose oppositional qualities defy quantification, but which insinuated themselves into local consciousness as sustained practices of non-conformity.

Both forms also share stances that are simultaneously in collusion with and

resistant to the deepening penetration of market forces into the terrain of the everyday. Zhang proved adept at harnessing the global art market as well as the explosion of media to insulate his graffiti from repression while expanding it and exposing it to greater visibility for a global audience. *Dialogue*'s embedded critique of the impact of market forces on Beijing happened to be funded through China's deepening entrenchment within a globalizing market-based system. While this raises the possibility that his graffiti degenerated into a purely spectacular rebelliousness, a fair question would be to ask whether his art would carry the same impact were it not for the market. One can conclude that commodification of Zhang's art, far from constricting his control over his work, in fact bolstered his claim to it and broadened its scope and reach. Similarly, in the online discussion about Qianmen, Web users apply state-sanctioned information technologies that are also primary drivers of the global market to engage in discourse tinged with apprehension toward the functioning of the market in the local political-economic setting. The seemingly conflictual relation here is reconciled when considering the difficulty and reluctance of these social actors to extricate themselves from the market that has given so generously to them yet who find reason to push back against its predations.

The premise of this investigation has been to reconsider the notion of resistance by observing forms that defy categorization as constituent parts of state-society binary linear events. As shown, both *Dialogue* and Internet forum discussion contain critiques of urban development delivered from relatively safe territory. Attacks are indirect and concealed behind anonymity, providing plausible deniability while gaining visibility that overt contention may not enjoy. In this sense, there exists a superficial resemblance between the forms presented here and Scott's "everyday forms of resistance." But key points of differentiation merit emphasis for their theoretical significance in reconceptualizing resistance in China. Both case studies were selected for their subversion of the teleology common to romanticized notions of popular contention. They provide occasion to observe resistance without it being tethered to outcomes, which presuppose a judgment of success or failure and encourage ideological polarization. To take the alternative view of resistance, each case can be seen as elements in the formation of China's contemporary regime of truth. Results of such actions are not guaranteed and it remains an open question whether the Chinese state at any level would feel threatened by Zhang's art or by online debate over Qianmen. Most likely, it would not. However, they provide evidence of sustained public actions that are fundamentally oppositional to official ideologies. Such acts upset the state's attempts at monopoly over the circulation of ideas and truths regarding urban development, while also serving notice that acceptance of the development-first ideology is not guaranteed.

The type of inquiry presented in this chapter is intended as a starting point for a more inclusive, multidimensional approach to resistance in China, one that allows the indeterminacy of acts to become central to the analytical focus. The cases here merely scratch the surface of the widespread engagements in cultural politics in China. The wealth of contemporary social phenomena that display a clear tendency toward non-conformity provides abundant evidence to forward this line of inquiry.

Notes

1 See also "A lot to be angry about", *The Economist*, May 1, 2008.

2 The term *dingzi hu* is a nationally used colloquialism referring to households that resist eviction. It is typically translated as "nail household."

3 Approximate number provided by the artist. Interview with the author, July 2006.

4 For news articles on Zhang and *Dialogue*, see: B. Maxiu (1998) "Qiangshang de biaoji" (Marks on the wall), *Musical Life*, April 16: B1; X. Bu (2001) "Duihua" (Dialogue), *Bejing Daily*, January 14: 8; W. Cao Weijun (1998) "Chengshi jianshe yu dushihua" (Urban development and urbanization), *Musical Life*, May 21: 1; Dan Wei (2000) "Zhang Dali shuo qiangshang de lian" (Zhang Dali talks about the heads on the wall), *World News Journal*, December 4: 9; Douzi (1998) "Shengtai yishu de wenhua luoji" (The cultural logic of cological art), *Zhonghua Dushu Bao*, May 6; Douzi (1998) "jieshang changjian de da touxiang" (The head often seen on the street), *Satellite Weekly*, 37; W. Duan (2001) "Yici xingwei yishu de tiyan he duihua" (The experience of performance art and "dialogue"), *China Quality Daily*, January 16: 8; F. Fathers (1999) "Democracy walls", *Asianweek*, April 23; C. Hang (1998) "Jietou tuya haocheng xingwei yishu" (The graffiti on the streets calls itself performance art), *Shenghuo shibao* (*Life Times*), March 10: 1; C. Hang (1998) "Benbao dujia fangdao jietou tuyaren" (Exclusive interview with the graffito), *Shenghuo shibao* (*Life Times*), March 18: 16; C. Hang (ed.) (1998) "Jietou renxiang shibushi yishu?" (Are the heads on the streets art?), *Shenghuo shibao* (Life Times), March 21: 8; W. Huang and W. Chao (2005) "Duihua yu 'Duihua' – Zhang Dali fangtan" (*Dialogue* and "dialogue" – an interview with Zhang Dali) in J. Li and W. Huang (eds.) *Xianchang 798 Yishu qu shihu*, Beijing: Culture and Art Publishing House; T. Jiang (1998) "Jujiao Beijing, jietou rentouxiang" (Focus on Beijing head images), *Lantian zhoumo* (*Bluesky Weekend*), March 27, 1471: 1; X. Ma (1998) "Jietou renxiang de chuzhong shi yishu" (The graffiti heads are art), *Shenghuo shibao* (*Life Times*), March 21; J. Rouse (2001) "China's Zorro makes his mark with graffiti", *Toronto Star*, March 4; M. Schepp (1999) "Protest mit Knubbelkoepfen", *Stern Magazine*, 124: 28; R. Sun (2005) "Tuya: jianshou ziwo huo bei gonggong shoupian" (Graffiti: speaking the self or a cheat), *Zhongguo xin wen zhou kan*, 1535, November 25; G. Tan (1992) "Zhuji huajia cunmin", *China Cooperative Journal*, May 5: 12; L. Wang (2000) "Chengshi tuya haishi xingwei yishu" (City graffiti or performance art?), *Beijing Youth Daily*, December 7: 12; G. Wood (2005) "Snap Dragons", *Guardian*, September 4; W. Wu, interview with Zhang Dali (n.d.) *Jin Ri Xian Feng – Yi shu jia xian chang: fang wen Zhang Dali*, available online at: http://en.cl2000.com/art_union/diancang/today_wen.shtml (accessed December 16, 2008); D. Zhang (2000) "Gen zhege shehui duihua" (Speaking with this society), *Art Observation*, 8.

5 I am especially indebted to Wu Hung and Maurizio Marinelli for their insights in their respective essays on Zhang Dali.

6 Interview with the author, July 2006.

7 Interview with the author, July 2006.

8 Interview with the author, December 2005.

9 See also W. Wu interview with Zhang Dali (n.d.) *Jin Ri Xian Feng – Yi shu jia xian chang: fang wen Zhang Dali*.

10 In a situation unique in China, many *hutong* residents in Beijing were permitted to retain personal ownership of their homes throughout the revolutionary period. See Y. T. Hsing (2006) "Land and territorial politics in urban China", *The China Quarterly*, 187: 575–91. Part of the Qianmen area is designated as Beijing's 25th heritage preservation zone.

11 The site bbs.oldbeijing.net has changed to oldbeijing.org. Passages quoted here on Site A are no longer accessible. China's major Internet portal sites also feature discussion forums dealing with Qianmen and urban redevelopment, as do university BBS sites and blog sites.

12 This idea is inspired by G. Debord (2006) *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, New York: Zone Books.

13 A poignant example of the Beijing Municipal Government's attempt to drive this point home is an elaborate, tourist-oriented scale model of the city on exhibit in a shining glass-and-steel hall at Qianmen. The model, which features completed renditions of buildings still under construction, functions to incorporate viewers into the process of redevelopment and stimulate fantasies about a hyper-modern future for Beijing.

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12 Politics of cultural heritage

Magnus Fiskesjö

China is not a country but an idea, which was reformulated in the twentieth century to fit with the hegemonic world nation-state system. This involved a reformulation not only of the idea of the Chinese Empire, but also of the remains of its past – including artifacts that once served as the mystified insignia of power of mighty rulers, or as the tokens of refinement and civilization, or simply as the ostentatious playthings of the wealthy; and also objects previously unknown unearthed by modern archaeology, that is, artifacts left by people living in "China" long before China became China. Similar to what has happened in other "countries," these objects have been recast as "national cultural heritage," and are believed to carry the essence of a Chineseness reaching back "5000 years" – a claim inseparable from the new *contemporary* global politics of representation in the arena of competing nation-states (where, one might say, modern China competes especially in the fields of "civilizational antiquity" and "unbroken continuity").

This process has also produced what I here call the "patriotic collector," wealthy collectors for whom pieces of exquisite classical art or antiquities not only represent opportunities for indulging in socially efficacious, ostentatious connoisseurship (which they indeed also very much are), but also are tools for demonstrating patriotic loyalty to the contemporary Chinese state. In this chapter,[1] I discuss how these patriotic millionaires engage in the "buying back" of "lost treasures," as well as their relationship with the new semi-autonomous concerned-citizens' movement that has arisen in recent years, campaigning for the repatriation of Chinese artifacts "lost abroad." I introduce some personal encounters with these repatriation efforts in Stockholm, Sweden, while I was recently serving as director of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities. I note how such patriotic initiatives unfold in close concert with government agencies and policies, which over the last decade have already allowed dealers and auctioneers to rapidly develop a hugely profitable market for art and antiquities, gathered under the general banner of "patriotism." I also explore the role of Chinese "relics" (*wenwu*) in these new social developments, which are replacing formerly popularized Marxist frameworks for interpreting the past and its remains as part of a shift toward a new Chinese nationalism. I offer too some speculations regarding the future development of Chinese collecting, including the question of whether China will ultimately outgrow the current narrow focus on objects embodying national heritage and appropriate the "imperial" Western model