

The Art of Disappearance

The idea of the modern state underwent a significant revision by Michael Foucault through his work *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975). Physical violence and repressive legislative power are no longer its dominant features, he argued, rather discipline and surveillance as applied to the whole social body. With these state measures, liberal democracy became a 'disciplinary society', one sustained by pervasive regimes of monitoring and meticulous scrutiny. Academic specialists on China have seized upon Foucault's thesis, and began to speak of slippages and detours of state power. Their hypothesis is that the totalitarian state is often less 'totalizing' than it is often thought to be.¹ It is a tantalizing proposition. Among other things, it proposes that state power is widely distributed over the social sphere; favours, gifts and personal relationships are means through which state power and political sponsorship are bestowed upon the well-connected and the deserving. With this Foucauldian legacy one may ask: if the Communist Party of China is still the dominant wielder of power in China, in what form is this anti-state discourse presented?

The juxtaposition of artworks by Xu Bing and Feng Mengbo in the same thematic exhibition² offers an interesting viewing and deliberation experience. I was provoked and made uneasy by my own thoughts. In their artworks the subject is grave and immense but made ironic; even humorous. Their treatment of the subject that so drives them is defused, made trivial. But has it, really? One is not sure. It is like one of those moments when something—love, desire, allure of a new iPhone—you think you have in your grasp suddenly vanishes. Potent yet elusive, it has its own life and refuses to be reined in. In contemporary Chinese art, there can only be two subjects that prove to be so enchanting. Culture or civilization—the grandeur and the burden of it, is one—the other is the communist state.

For many observers, the engagement with the state has given contemporary Chinese art a rigour and vitality not seen in the West for a considerable time. The Andy Warhols and Damien Hirsts of the artworld have been arrested by ennui and the imposing nihilism of our time, while Chinese artists appear to hold on to a solid core of references and meanings rivalled only by the works of Socialist Realism. It is fortuitous then that authoritarianism has given Chinese art its subject, you are thinking. It would be facile, of course, to suggest a sense of direct influence, as if everything in China's contemporary art has sprung from a single source—Maoism's excesses since the People's Republic of China's founding in 1949. Yet, one is amazed by the confidence, by the unwavering foundationalism, in the way the Chinese artists have laid out their polemics. Perhaps this explains the central character of Chinese art that emerged from the rise of Deng Xiaoping in 1978. From the work of the Scar artists of the late 1970s to those of the Star Group the following decade, they shared the cynicism, the rage, the pained disenchantment in their tussles with the institution that drove their censure. Often, even among the so-called Cynical Realists (critics have been fast and easy with their labelling), for all their demotion of things of post-Deng China, artists like Zeng Fanzhi,

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YAO SOUCHOU



Memories are wiped ...

The man no279467 is sleeping naked because it is too hot.

记忆无痕

Lui Wei and others gave the impression that they knew exactly where their works were directing their critique—towards the Chinese state—social and personal trauma having been their driving forces. If this is correct, their expressions increasingly look like a symptom—an irrepressible manifestation—of the experiences that had torn apart the nation. An event like the Cultural Revolution has given contemporary Chinese art a psychological tenor, a heightened imagining of history and its cataclysmic effects. Trauma may be too modish for an art review. But it depicts succinctly what is hard to miss: how history has morphed into a persistent theme, how the artists seem to work by returning to the critical events that were terrifying, yet inspiring.

In psychological jargon, the suffering of the traumatic is personal. But it is also social, especially when it is shared by a collective of people: what immediately comes to mind are the Holocaust and the Cultural Revolution. Chinese contemporary artists are not wrong in identifying the communist state as the source of their ruinous experiences. For many of them 1966 to 1976 was a decade of lost childhood. But Maoism made no apology for its brutal repression in China's march to socialist paradise. We know which side we should invest our politics. We are less sure when it comes to art criticism.

Through his decades-long career, Xu Bing has taken on the Chinese state through his work. Perhaps unlike many artists of his generation, Xu shuns the psychologically obsessive; his approach is light, almost *laissez faire*. The work that established his international reputation is *Tian Shu –Book from the Sky* (1987-91).³ The wood prints on paper reproduce, with immaculate fidelity to the traditional form, thousands of fake characters. However, it is a fakery that both demolishes and celebrates one of Chinese civilization's greatest achievements. It is said that Qin Shi Huang, the first emperor of all China, had standardized Chinese characters for use in his realm. The reform in writing, like his other measures, was undeniably a state project. *Tian Shu* is, if you like, a work of 'desire delayed'. For those who can read Chinese, the recognition is kept back by the immaculate form: the characters are so perfectly crafted that it takes a while to recognize their fakery. The pleasure and the surprise is like meeting a long-lost friend in a moment of shock recognition. Carved by woodblock masters, the nonsense characters took unmistakably the traditional calligraphic form. *Book from the Sky* is most powerful when it invites cultural insiders into a game of sleight-of-hand both witty and revealing; to recognize the faked characters, to see through their 'non-sense', and to flatter your cultural skill. One can also see it another way, however. If *Tian Shu* belittles Chinese civilization and its achievements, it also celebrates them. As cultural critique, *Tian Shu* is most powerful when it resurrects calligraphy's immaculate form. If its fakery has torn down the edifice of Chinese civilization, it also resurrects it in an even more faithful act, of replication.

There is plenty of this double-footed dialectic in Xu Bing's latest offering, *Dragonfly Eyes* (2017), a work of different tempo and polemics. The surveillance videos that form the bulk of the film flickered and gleamed, the rapid cuts create in the mind an impression as fluid as the images themselves. *Dragonfly Eyes* has emanated from a rich harvest, of ten thousand hours of (publically accessible online) surveillance videos from various sources: shopping malls, carparks, traffic police, street CCTV, for any number of purposes: anti-crime, graffiti-prevention, traffic monitoring, people surveillance. (To these Xu Bing might probably add: human curiosity). Among these functions, surveillance is the most potent: the all-seeing, scanning and monitoring without aim, waiting to capture things that may or may not happen. Eyes of a dragonfly, with their multiple lenses capable of a baroque array of visions—they seem just right to describe Xu's work and the Foucauldian enterprise of the Chinese state in the use of surveillance as state policy. Like much of the world,

everyday life in China's towns and cities is 'eyed' and 'gazed at' by an explicit, ubiquitous technology of observation. The headline of a recent article in *The Atlantic Monthly* tells all: "China's Surveillance State Should Scare Everyone: The country is perfecting a vast network of digital espionage as a means of social control – with implications for democracies worldwide"⁴ – the implication being that China's usage has moved beyond declared reasons (of public safety and criminal apprehension), this extreme surveillance becoming the central measure in the creation of an uber-disciplined society, the totalitarian state enhancing its totalizing power by way of this technology.

As a critique of the state, though, *Dragonfly Eyes* is more mischievous than disparaging. State surveillance may be a part of everyday life – shopping malls, car parks and private residences have it as well. CCTV is the norm and the state one of the players. Watching Xu Bing's film, you are reminded that in China, as elsewhere, separation between state and society is never straightforward, like the notion of the nation-state with its awkward, giveaway hyphen. In all of Xu Bing's art, his approach has been a sliding flanking movement, rather a frontal attack. From *Tian Shu* to *Dragonfly Eyes*, his take on the confluence of the Communist Party of China and culture is ambiguous, an ambivalent desire, as it advances the Chinese state and society to a grim assessment.

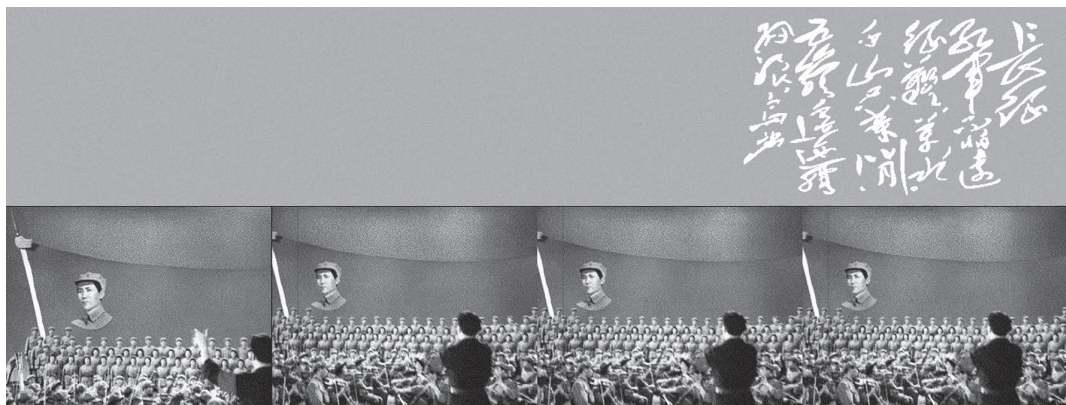
It is not surprising then when a love story is interlaced with this oppressive surveillance reality – one of love lost and found, and lost again. The man pursues a woman and is soon abandoned by her. But then, she is in search of someone, something; we don't know. Has he actually met her, or has he conjured her from his yearning among the debris of urban chaos? The *mise en scène* of longing is cast in a hairdressing salon, a cheap hotel, a gym. For all the misery of abortive love, the style is in the mode of a Douglas Sirk film, lush and melodramatic, as in the courtship of Rock Hudson the gardener, of the upper-class widow stricken with blindness in *All that Heaven Allows* (1959). Despair is a pencil line away from personal fulfilment: this may well be the perfect metaphor of the magic of the Chinese state. The love affair adds a lyricism to the work's images of urban wretchedness. And the Hegelian moment: if China's urban malaise can hold the possibility of love and carnal tenderness, so can the communist state – any state – steer its awesome machinery towards fulfilling its obligations of care and keeping the peace.

Indeed, the European idea of the state is similarly associated with brutality and oppression. For Max Weber, the state is defined by the legitimacy of its use of violence. However, if the state is an instrument of the ruling class, as Marx would have it, it is not without its redeeming social functions. The state represses, but it also maintains order; it protects society from chaos, it makes laws, it keeps the proverbial trains running on time. For the theorist Thomas Hobbes, the state keeps at bay the conflict between individuals because in nature they put first their own interests. If in nature people are free, they are also driven to dispute and conflict. For all its philosophical complexities, from Hobbes to Hegel to Marx, the state delivers. And in China (not to forget the former communist states of Eastern Europe), the most important of its offerings has been economic security: the proverbial "iron rice bowl".⁵

You are now in the next room, and no more the dark and gloomy urban scenes that have kept your vision affixed on the screen. The bright light startles, and the electronic smog of China's cityscape gives way to a computer game. *The Long March Restart* (2008) manifests its intentions so blatantly that you suspect a trick. The communist state is unambiguously the subject of engagement, but the



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anti-state sophistry is of a different kind. The artist Feng Mengbo's video (game) bravely enters the belly of the beast. The story of the Long March recounts the Red Army's nine thousand kilometre retreat from October 1934 to escape the encirclement and pursuit of the Nationalist forces, reaching the base of Yan'an in China's north in October 1935. Children at school learn about the Long March, movies have been made of it, and the hillside town of Yan'an has become the must-see for those following the trail of Red tourism, from guerrilla base to guerrilla base. Detraction drops easily from the lips. The Long March is a cliché, the Long March is state propaganda – until we remember every state deserves its own Long March. Russia has Stalingrad, Australia has Gallipoli, Britain has Dunkirk (amongst others), the USA has George Washington crossing the Delaware River; let China have the Long March! Like the others, the Chinese communist legend is full of epic endurance and monumental achievements. And here too the hand of the communist state is everywhere in the remaking of history into national myth.

Feng Mengbo, born 1966, is of the post-Cultural Revolution generation. His take on the Long March reflects the relatively liberal climate of post-Deng China. I find *The Long March Restart* humorous, with a touch of the tragic. As such it tends to seduce and corral you into a single discursive position. I watch a young woman playing the interactive video game, and from the screen the Red Army soldier is busily hurling thoughts at my mind. It is not too much to think that Feng too wanted a great arena of play, not only to wrestle with the communist state and its powerful ideology.

Feng's work takes the form of a computer game in a retro Super Mario-style, but with a Red Army soldier replacing the eponymous plumber. Not a habitual gamer, I fix my cursor on the soldier and take him on the loop. This gamer, this effete intellectual, is on the controls. The Red Army soldier leaps, fights, throws Coca Cola cans as bombs as he fences off his foes at each obstacle. But the foes are not Nationalist soldiers, or evil landlords, or anti-revolutionary rightists. Each push of the joystick stalls the soldier's movements, then takes him leaping across another hurdle. I am learning the patience of the seasoned gamer: the player's dexterity does not always reward; risk and disappointment are a part of the gamesmanship. Having given up his traditional nemeses, the Red Army soldier looks lost. He is battling enemies not of his choosing: ghosts, demons and other fiendish beings. It is the Long March meets *The Journey to the West* (*Monkey* of the Japanese TV series). The soldier is heroic, but there is no posturing of the Socialist Realism mode. I play on, feeling fatigued. I find it hard to remember the wins and the defeats, the stages of the game before the finale. Like every gamer, I want to win but everything soon becomes a blur: the Red Army soldier, his journey, his nemeses, the whole point of the game.

The experiences of viewing and playing feel like a deception. The subject – it's in the title – lures you in. But much is left out. Even the Red Army soldier is not how he normally appears. What kind of Long March is it without the 1935 battle of the Luding Bridge, when less than thirty Red Army volunteers crawled over the iron chains of the suspension bridge over the Dadu River while under heavy Nationalist machine-gun fire to secure the bridgehead? Your mind swims in a sea of meaning and inferences; but you are hard put to draw a single conclusion.

It is phenomenal that, in these post-Cold War days, much of what China does still earns the label 'propaganda', which suggests exaggeration, and falsehood; it is morally insidious in justifying what cannot be justified. Propaganda lends dignity to the state; it implies a conspiracy to prop up its legitimacy and power. The People's Republic of China does this, as do the liberal democratic states, in different ways. The PRC is constituted by many a myth. But myth is more than falsehood. For Barthes, "Myth is type of speech, a system of communication." Myth might be deceptive if not erroneous, but it is never arbitrary. Myth transforms history into what is true and natural.

He writes, “for it is human history which converts reality into speech, and it alone rules the life and the death of mythical language. Ancient or not, mythology can only have an historical foundation, for myth is a type of speech chosen by history: it cannot possibly evolve from the ‘nature’ of things.”⁶ All the concealments, the falsifications, of the Chinese state are revealed in Barthes’ notion of myth. And it shows up the unease we feel as we try come to terms with what we see, with the question: what is *Dragonfly Eyes* trying to say, what is the central motif of *The Long March Restart*? Both appear to take on the state, yet what they impart is less than a feeling of certainty. I speak for myself: as I view and consider my thinking, the Chinese state is like a bait, luring me into a trap, and casting out the thoughts except those of its glory and terrible power. The state, in love with itself, preens before the mirror, and the critic is the sole, privileged witness.

A photographer friend tells me of her experience. Imagine strapped inside a two-seater plane, a camera in your hands, fighting nausea while waiting to take the perfect shot. You see below an empty open pit, like a launch site of a departed alien spaceship after a visit to the pathetic earthlings. You urge the pilot, get lower! Get lower! The plane descends; it is a huge abandoned mining pit, desolate and empty. As you point the camera, your mind is already busily thinking, what shall I do with these photos? What kind of art shall I make of the image? You know you have found your subject — the rapacious mining company and the destruction corporate capitalism has unleashed upon the environment. Forget the ground’s visual majesty and spiritual grandeur, or the magnificence of its pure abstract patterns. Political criticism is the thing.

After John Berger’s *Ways of Seeing* (1972), the shaping of the manner in which we see and understand art by power and class has gained an ineluctable argument. That is how it should be. Our economic and ideological interests make us focus on this or that object or figure, and what we find interesting and choose to look expresses this class position. Some of us who grew up with his writings saw his argument as a necessary corrective of the view of art as complete and self-sufficient in its beauty and the power to please. Quite simply, one’s aesthetic choices are largely politically based. Speaking of my discipline — anthropology — social constructionism is still the instrument with which to critique culture, tradition, the nation-state and most famously, imperialism. In subsequent years, additional important issues have been proffered. If ‘X’ is ‘socially constructed’, it forgets the historical and cultural forces taking place that make ‘X’ real. Social construction is not argument, it points to a given and to what has already been accomplished, Michael Taussig has suggested.⁷ For me, critically reviewing art forces one to truly *see* and to recognize *seeing* as the first indispensable step in the forming of judgement. Art is not a domain one can view through a window or an open door; we need to be there, inside, up close with the artwork. *Dragon Eyes* and *The Long March Restart* have driven me to a set of misconceptions and speculations. Are they really a blow to the Chinese state? Both artists seemingly want to nudge their work towards that direction; or do they? The outside-looking-in social construction of the state narrative didn’t lead us very far. Xu Bing and Feng Mengbo are artists of mental agility and talent for imagination, their work strikes one less an assault on the state, than a subtle exploration of the communist state’s hold on people and society — a state that oppresses as much as it protects and keeps in order instills a collective desire in its citizens that is difficult to be explicated and deconstructed.



Notes

¹ See Mayfair Mei-hui Yang, *Gifts, Favors, and Banquets: The Art of Social Relationships in China*, Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1994

² *The Sleeper Awakes*, White Rabbit Gallery, Sydney, 9 March–28 July, 2018 reflected upon on China's society where unprecedented freedom, ambition and optimism coexist uneasily with anxiety, isolation and ubiquitous state surveillance

³ "It is awful Xu and Feng work with poor translators. *Book from the Sky* should be *Books from Heaven*—"Sky" is a neutral term, the terrain in the cloud. "Heaven" and "sky" are the same in Chinese, but "Heaven" has an entirely different meaning. And *The Long March Restart* should be *The Long March Reboot* for a computer game." Souchou Yao, email to the editor, 22 June 2018

⁴ Anna Mitchell and Larry Diamond, 2 February 2018; <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/02/china-surveillance/552203/>; accessed 22 June, 2018

⁵ A Chinese term used to refer to an occupation with guaranteed lifetime security and benefits within the communist system, with all workers and farmers, and all aspects of their daily lives under state control; now post-Deng both the term and its reality has been abolished by the government to reduce financial pressures upon the state

⁶ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, Annette Laver trans., New York: Noonday Press, 1972, p. 101

⁷ Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses*, London: Psychology Press, 1993