To YAN Li and His Peers: Prototype for a New Generation [1]

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Invocation

> A warrant is out for the arrest of Yan Li! Catch that man smelling of alcohol and cheap perfume. There he is, running over rooftops with paintbrushes and unfinished poems hanging out of his pockets. Jumping into a courtyard, sprinting through alleys, he escapes on to the open road. Meanwhile, beautiful girls and young women worry about his safety and secretly long for his embrace.[2]

Once I received a request to pay tribute to Yan Li (严力) and his friends, I immediately heard sounds from the Motown song 'Dancing in the Streets', a party song from 1960's USA but also an unofficial anthem for the Civil Rights Movement. Black people all over the country were literally dancing in the streets. They had come out of their claustrophobic ghetto apartments and were claiming all of America's streets as their own, and those like me on the left who supported them and participated in their struggles, were drifting out of our hideouts unafraid of the FBI, the Black List, and the KKK. Some practiced Gandhi's passive resistance to challenge racist laws. Others picked up guns in self – defense or rioted and burned down buildings to proclaim their dignity. At the same time, the 'bad boys and girls' of the Black Arts Movement were reading poems to the revolutionary jazz of Albert Ayler, Archie Shepp, and John Coltrane, what we used to call The New Thing, celebrating the beauty of their people and culture while unleashing their anger and rage at an oppressive social and political system.

These references are relevant to my subject, because in some important ways there are parallels between what was going on culturally and politically in the U.S from the late 1950s through the early 1970s and what occurred in China from the late 1970s through the early 1990s. Young writers, artists, intellectuals and later university students openly challenged the status quo in both countries and called for a transformation of their societies. Yan Li and his comrades, who were members of *Xing Xing* (星星 *Stars*) and *Jintian* (今天 *Today*), functioned as a cultural activist vanguard. They inspired other Chinese who had recently entered or graduated from the newly reopened art academies, music conservatories, and film academy. And, simultaneously, established Chinese writers and intellectuals and some government officials were positioning themselves to make a U turn and engage in debate about how to create a new China. This period of frenzied analysis and discussion, now known as High Culture Fever, raged in Beijing throughout much of the 1980s.

The *Xing Xing* and *Jintian* activists were among the first wave of writers and artists who called for a new modern culture and society that would promote artistic and personal freedom. Having survived the Cultural Revolution and with only a few years of formal education, they openly rejected the socialist propaganda art and literature of their youth. They came out of *hutong (*胡同), run down government apartment buildings, and factory dormitories in Beijing during the late 1970s and early 1980s and reclaimed public spaces for themselves. They read modern poetry in historical ruins, held unofficial modern art shows, and danced to

rock n' roll in public parks, secretly posted slogans, poems and drawings on Democracy Wall and participated in the famous 1979 street demonstration for artistic freedom. And they were in some ways China's first hipsters. They adopted the cool existential style of the actors and actresses in the international films they saw screened in foreign embassies, modeled themselves on some of the characters in the American and European novels they read. And they embraced the free lifestyle of the rock n' roll and jazz musicians they listened and danced to. They drank too much, got into too many fights and switched girlfriends and boyfriends more often than they needed, and back in their small rooms, out of sight of the public, they blatantly broke the sexual taboos of their time. A sense of freedom and spontaneity permeated their lives. They were young and reckless, lived for the moment, unafraid, and life seemed open ended.

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Back in Yan Li's Brooklyn studio in 1999, we talked about the need to bring the discussion of Chinese culture in the 1980s back to its origins, Beijing, and to two important interconnected cultural movements, *Xing Xing* and *Jintian,* which were responsible for launching new and experimental art and literary movements. They did more than simply break with the prevailing communist proletarian culture. They followed in the footsteps of prior generations of radical Chinese writers and artists who turned to the West for ideas and culled Chinese cultural traditions on the margins for new points of departure. Far from simply embracing and working through Western styles in art and literature as some have claimed, they cannibalized whatever they could use and made it their own. Like the modernist experiments of Latin American artists and writers, they used imported ideas and practices as tools for breaking outmoded forms and traditions, as weapons for exploding consciousness and bringing to light an imagination rooted in personal experience which reflected the experience of an entire nation.

Notes

1 This is an excerpt from α longer version of an article that I am currently writing and will be published on the CIFA website later.

2 My invocation was inspired by the Anselm Hollo poem, 'A Warrant is out for the arrest of Henry Miller', *Evergreen Review Reader* (1957-1966), New York, Blue Moon Books, 1993. Anselm Hollow was a Finnish poet with close ties to the Beat Movement and was a friend of Allen Ginsberg who Yan Li and Bei Dao (北岛) met when they went into exile in NYC during the mid 1980's. It was also inspired by the comments of Yan Li's female friends in Beijing who told me about riding on the back of his bicycle and about how they had crushes on him because of his movie star good looks.