Artificial Light, Beijing

Tom Cliff is a Postdoctoral Fellow on the ARC Laureate project ‘Informal Life Politics in the Remaking of Northeast Asia’ at the Australian National University. Tom’s part of this project concerns the informal institutions of family and enterprise in contemporary China. He is currently completing a book manuscript on experiences of being Han in Xinjiang. – The Editors

Published on 18 February 2014 by Thomas Cliff

Prologue: A Sort of Darkness

There’s a man who sits selling spicy tofu and vegetables on skewers in a not-yet redeveloped area, no more than thirty metres wide, between Peking University and the Fourth Ring Road. Beyond the twelve or fourteen lines of traffic to his south is the hyper-modernity of Zhongguancun, but he finds his place in this liminal strip: anti-aspiration between aspirational heights. He is no longer young but not yet middle aged. He stays in that one spot for twelve hours a day, midday to midnight, every day. When he is not actively serving a customer, he just sits there, almost motionless and completely expressionless; he doesn’t look happy or sad, and my chest tightens each time I walk past.

I think of the space that he moves in each day. He is not rich, so he must have very small living quarters; even smaller if he lives within an hour’s journey of his workplace, my thoroughfare, the place where he sits staring into space or unhurriedly but never slowly serving his customers for what I estimate to be seventy-five percent of his waking hours; yet smaller again if we consider how much of the living space must be occupied by the products and utensils of his work; and smaller a fourth degree when we consider how the smell of the oils and spices that he uses on his cooking pervades his entire existence. I find myself wondering what happens to a person’s psychological state when there is no escape from this total bodily immersion in one’s means of livelihood!

His movement in space must be limited, with rare exceptions, to these two constrained spaces and the path in between them.

He seems not to be thinking of anything, as he sits there, still. (I think that he sits there still). He doesn’t even seem to be waiting, or perhaps he has perfected the art of waiting. The art of waiting without expecting anything in particular, or at any particular time, but nevertheless to wait with hope is being practised by people all over China; it is a behaviour conditioned by the economy of uncertainty and the lack of control that many people feel over their own lives. Reducing the scope of one’s life and one’s ambition is a response to the fear and individual mental instability produced by uncertainty.

That’s why I feel a clutching in my chest whenever I think of walking past this man. I think that he looks so calm because he limits his thoughts to his need to earn an income and hence to the highly constrained physical space he occupies – it’s a choice he has made from the very limited choices available to him. If he didn’t limit his aspirations, surely he would drive himself mad.
I walk past because I don't like to eat the type of food that he serves, but he seems not to be short of patrons. Many of them he seems to recognise – regulars. They sit and eat; he speaks in a soft and measured tone. When they are there, I don't feel so bad about walking past. If somebody is ahead of me as we approach, I will them to stop and purchase something because I imagine myself in his position, and I imagine myself in a constant state of tension, waiting for the next customer, to help rid me of my burden of decaying food. The food is by nature decaying from the time it is produced: its edible life-span is only a few hours. So he is trapped again, in time as well as in space. And yet there remains the question of whether he is psychologically trapped – or more precisely, whether he constrains his thoughts and aspirations in order to keep despair at a distance.

I failed to photograph him in the way that I imagine him. I myself was waiting for an opportunity that would allow me to record that disturbing placidity without disturbing the placidity itself. I realised that he was aware of, without looking directly at, every inch of the space in front of him, and even a slight pause would be noticed. I could not swim in that placid pool without breaking the water—and then it would of course no longer be placid. He did not possess the space, but he occupied it, non-exclusively, by familiarity. In the end, the last time I saw him, I photographed him from outside 'his space' - with results that reflect the associated dislocation.

Between the first time that I saw him and the last, I kept in my mind the intense feeling of claustrophobia that I have tried to describe above. I kept photographing (see below), and I tried to make some sense of the different social spaces that I passed through, or by, every time I went from somewhere to somewhere else. I came to know that the borders and overlaps of social spaces are more apparent at night than in daylight: while natural light, however artificially modified by smog and urban superstructures, bathes the prince and the pauper in the same grey glow, artificial light distinguishes them. Different types of people exist in and produce different types of light.

Looking towards Peking University. Shaoyuan.

Outside
Secondhand clothing shop run by migrant workers, for migrant workers. Light industrial village in Chaoyang suburbs.

The “New Workers Theatre.” Organised by migrant workers’ unofficial “union,” with union members and employees performing. Chaoyang suburbs.
Boiling water using coal brickettes. Chaoyang suburbs.

Repairing an axle on his tricycle. He doesn't have any light himself. Chaoyang suburbs.

Inside
Advising is the greatest of artificial suns. Zhongguancun.

Changchunjie pedestrian underpass.
Everything stops for the other world in the small screen. Outside Zhongguancun subway station.

After eating and drinking, Yihayuan Road.

Together
After eating and drinking #2, Negotiating on Yiheyuan Road.

Xizimen.
The strip between Peking University and Zhongguancun.

Apart
Diptych #A. Migrant men watching weekly theatrical performance at the “New Workers' Theatre.” Chaoyang suburbs.

Diptych #B. The “New Workers' Theatre” MC and organisor. Chaoyang suburbs.

The moon between Peking University and Zhongguancun.
Looking out from Peking University, Yiheyuan Road.

Copyright

This website and the China Story Yearbook are open-access materials published under a Creative Commons 3.0 Unported license.

We encourage the widespread circulation of the material published on this website. While all content may be used and copied, we request that you credit The China Story Project and provide a link to: www.TheChinaStory.org.

We occasionally publish images from other websites; we do this under the terms of the Digital Millennium Copyright Act; if you are a rights owner and object to our use of an image, please let us know via our contact page.