

Chairman Mao, the Exile, and the Ravaged Cyclist

DI YANG

I am experiencing the hardest time I have ever had right now. I cannot be more regretful that I am not able to go back home to celebrate the Year of the Boar these days, and even worse, I cannot be more sensitive to feeling the loneliness standing in such a cold and flurry night on a foreign land, without the greetings from my family and friends and the warm, boiling pandemonium which is filled with people and laughter and lanterns and fireworks that once drove me crazy. I am in New York now, a place where miracles sprout, where dreams come true, and where everyone calls it home. She ought to be my home, I think. She lights her pride—the Empire State Building—to help remind me of the air of home and to make me feel consoled and dependable by dyeing herself in Chinese vermilion and gold. I am grateful for all she has done to me, Thank You, New York, but eventually I turn my respect to her, as a guest, and as a visitor.

Speaking of my life that I spent in my hometown, I can barely make it a series of stories, but rather, it is made up of thousands of discrete feelings, senses, and dismantled shadows. It was, in most cases, so tender, so weak that now I can hardly notice its shape, its outlines, and its appearances that have been showing on my sight. That was only a place where I was born and lived, and everything about it is just the way it should be, and it is just what it was meant to be. I have only been to The Forbidden City twice, and for me, tens of thousands of visitors that make up a gigantic tide ebbing and flowing around the palace every single day is much more attractive and intriguing than the Palace itself; I passed by the Tian'anmen Square nearly every week, and I can always see the portrait of Chairman Mao hung on the surface of the Tian'anmen Gate, or on the Heavenly Peace Gate, peacefully, without change. Wearing his Mao Suit and his classical glazed hair, Mao has been watching the capital, even the country for over half a century; he projects his bold but solemn sights upon the ever-changing land, carrying a tender but

sometimes invisible, awkward beam on his face, building himself such a statue-like figure, without dynamics, without excitement. What really confuses me is that for most Chinese people who live outside Beijing, the most important and valuable thing they would do in their lives would be to visit our grand capital in person, tread the ground of Tian'anmen Square, show their solemnity and salutes to their previous "Great Leader, Great Captain, and Great Teacher" Chairman Mao in his memorial hall that is erected in the center of the Square, and to his portrait on the Gate that can freeze the moment and bring us back to memories or imaginings. People are looking for the living body of the country, but they are doing this by visiting the dead body of her history; it seems that people are living with the dynamic beauty they are feeling around their bodies while at the same time being presided over by a corpse.

I hate this. I hate the way people are looking at our previous leader, no matter what kind of impression he shines upon them. They look so ignorant and stupid and purposeless and . . . as if Mao is a piece of artwork, as if he is as beautiful and as aesthetic as the Mona Lisa. What people only do is stand in front of the gate and take a picture with him as a proof of the unforgettable trip. I hate the ugliness of the society that ignores the history while the unconscious scarring has not yet healed within our bodies, and I hate the way people treat Mao as a travel attraction instead of as a history-changer. It's so ugly.

I want the environment to change, as dramatically and tremendously as it can; I am hoping this not because of its internal ugliness or its blandness, but because of a sense of unfaithfulness that airs and haunts my world. Living in this place for over eighteen years made me extremely impatient.

The portrait of Chairman Mao, as a symbol of Chinese history and as a testament to the country's political life, has been hung on the surface of Tian'anmen Gate since he declared the foundation of the New China after the Communist Party Army defeated the Nationalist sovereignty in 1949. He worked and strove hard with his colleagues to pursue a harmonious society by pushing forward an ideal that now seems utopian and impossible. As a child who grew up in the decades after his death, I've always seen Mao as a complicated figure. He was powerful and ambitious to me. While my country, one of the fastest growing countries in the world, still venerates him as "the eternal glory" officially, I didn't see any contribution he meant to leave us, and neither do my fellow people. And indeed, what he gave me is a spontaneous but vague repugnance, because of what he has done to my compatriots and

the way he has influenced my society and my country. My Dad always says to me that Chairman Mao is greatly resented by his generation because they could not go to college as easily as I was able to. But ironically, these people have to live their lives by using Chinese currency every day with the portrait of Mao engraved on every single Yuan note. "He is being forgotten and remembered at the same time." Dad sighed as he grinned slightly.

Luckily, I have finally found an opportunity to go abroad and finally have a chance to get rid of these landscapes filled with indifference and paradoxes, to start a new life with a brand new environment, and to find the beauty of a different life, the beauty that I think is much more touchable. So, here I am, in New York.

Andy Warhol is the artist who changed my viewpoint on my country. *The Portrait of Chairman Mao*, which was drawn with passion, excitement, and mystery, is the one that I could never see in China, where his face has already become a cliché that reappears over and over again in my life.

The power of Warhol's art changes my mind. As I encountered the masterpiece in the Strand, a bookstore full of scents of New York, located on Broadway, I saw Chairman Mao standing in the midst of the great fantasy that New York City creates every day, making him a vivid, refreshing figure. What I see in Warhol's eye is that Chairman Mao is filled with difference and legend. The over-saturated hues on his face shocked me. His face was colored with bright paints, and his lips were dyed in exaggerated purple and red, as if he was made up or dressed up as a woman, an idea that could definitely not be considered in China where his identity is much more a political icon and a national leader than an aesthetic model for dyeing and skewing. Furthermore, what attracted me to Warhol's painting is its powerful color contrast and unfathomable creativity. It is so magical that I felt a total strangeness when I saw Mao in such bright colors, the Mao whose stark, placid figure was once deeply engraved in my life. He was suddenly changed to a total stranger with a heterogeneous personality and figure, a man utterly indifferent to politics and revolutions who is only interested in showing off himself and enjoying the beautiful life. And the more I look at him, the more I can draw from his gaze, his facial expressions, and his overall tints. I see the easiness, I see the pleasure, and I see the beauty of aesthetic transformations.

Warhol recorded the history without saying a word about it. Not only did he bring history back to life with the most contrastive colors, he also beautified the history, as if it flowed as easily as it is shown on his canvas. The bright colors make Mao younger and prettier; they make the reality more

energetic than it looks while muting the rebellious and turbulent history, nullifying it. This is the same artist who created a silent film of the Empire State Building in 1964 and shot it for eight hours straight. Warhol was an artist who seemed fascinated by the stationary, the monument whose beauty may be remarkable but whose mode is stasis. When I saw this masterpiece in architecture erected in the center of the screen, colored black and white and gray, in the Museum of Modern Art the other day, I believed he just recorded a most normal day in a most normal way. But as I looked out of the Bobst Library of NYU, staring at the authentic Empire State Building dyeing itself in red and yellow, I realized that Warhol's *Empire* is much more beautiful and powerful than the colored one I saw out the window, for Warhol's has lasted over eight hours without blinks or redundant decorations; he showed it as pure as it is. While mine only appeared in my mind for a few seconds—an image which lacks much of its soul and its content.

I am confused again. Am I still looking for the authentic beauty? But where exactly will I find it? From the beautified, dynamic life that flattened and folded the history, like my fellow citizens and the beautiful Mao, or from the purity, the dense and iridescent complexity of history that backs and builds up the translucent reality like the black and white Empire State Building?

I am really ready to learn to look for the real beauty at this time, no matter how history and reality mix and how illusions and sensations entangle. I started to pay attention to the things that would easily slip away from my recognition, which I think in some way could remind me of something I will never realize, something larger than life and beyond my consciousness. I intensively feel that things once familiar to me are becoming totally alien, and those I have not seen my entire life are suddenly making me feel at home and comfortable. More specifically, what I hate, what I adore, what I have been ignoring, and what I have been indifferent to have all changed and become fresh in my life.

The winter in New York can be extremely cold. Gusts of gales roared and punched and pricked hard upon my face and my bare neck when I walked on West 22nd Street to the Chelsea Art Museum the other day. It was terribly cold, and I did not wear a scarf. And actually I never wear scarves. I did not wear scarves when I was in Beijing either; the winter there seemed darker, colder, and longer than New York's. The naps and the threads that sprawl all over the scarf make me feel more pricked and intolerant than the needling winds do. I feel pretty comfortable and cozy trudging against the wind; it reminds me of my past, although it hurts and makes me risk catching a bad

cold, as if I were just dragging myself on my way home facing a dreary twilight in a freezing day when I was in Beijing.

Like Andre Aciman, I am an exile. In his essay "Shadow Cities," Aciman claims that exiles act on impulse. "[They] look for their homeland abroad, to bridge the things here to things there" (424). I hated the glacial wind, but what did I do? I exposed myself to the cold, I went out without a scarf or any other cold-proof weapons with me, justifying that I enjoyed this new place, this new body very much. Was I looking for my homeland? Was I bridging my thoughts that I had left on the other side of the Pacific? Or was I just mimicking what I had always done in my hometown so that I could keep my identity and my soul as pure and Oriental as they once were? What I had missed was recollected, what I had ignored was noticed, even what I had always detested was remembered and rediscovered as a symbol of home. But I would rather say that I am looking for my new home that decorates my memories than to be held back by my unconscious nostalgia.

I have already borne such a feeling, or more exactly, an illusion, for over half a year since I landed in this city. The feeling is real, but it always keeps its vagueness and subtlety. It aroused in me a sense of strange familiarity, but I could not really tell what I saw in my sights apart from what I saw in my mind. I breathed the dry, cold air of New York, but I smelled the scent of falling leaves and withering petals along the Chang'An Avenue in Beijing; I felt the chilling winds that blew from New Jersey, from Upper State, or even from the Atlantic Ocean, but what truly poked and needled me was coming from Siberia and from the Gobi Desert, mixing sands and dirt, rolling and tossing itself upon my body.

While I was busy arranging my thoughts and interpreting my feelings, I came across a huge photograph of an old woman, between 60 and 70, riding a bike. I saw her in the Chelsea Art Museum, sticking out her bottom, showing off her ornamented coquetry.

I thought I could hear her panting and her groans coming from gears and roller chains; I heard a series of constant, mechanical sounds pushing my ears and pressuring my nerves. She was panting but also smiling; she was getting high but also seemed tired; she was old but also pretended to be graceful. She smiled at me, fiercely pursuing her goal of getting sexier, prettier, and younger. She rode on her exquisite painted bicycle with courage, confidence, and great joy.

She stared at me yet possessed a strange sense of elegance. She rode hard but with a sense of tenderness. Did she crave youth and beauty? Would she gamble everything to reclaim her youth and her beauty and sacrifice her

withered body? She wore her shiny, black varnished bikini and heavy make-up. Most people would laugh at her, consider her vulgarity freakish, at best extremely eccentric. She had fashioned, curly blond hair setting off her meticulously ornamented face. If not desiring beauty, how dare she expose her whole body to the world at such an old age!

I was greatly amazed. I stood in front of the photo and blinked at her, mocking her pretentious temperament and her ugly beauty, thinking that she would never ever catch up with youth and beauty again as she competes with time. She rides while time walks. How can she bend her bottom upwards like that and expose herself in such a sluttish way without the slightest embarrassment? Is it simply that she is unabashedly pursuing beauty? And indeed, she has already told the world everything about her unbearable, inharmonious ugliness before she tries to flirt. I thought to myself, you are playing a dangerous game, ma'am.

But what about me? Did I find my beauty?

Surprisingly, she smiled, as if she had heard what my mind said and replied with her inaudible voice. She looked familiar to me, I suddenly realized. We must have met somewhere before, and I looked pretty familiar to her too. But I just cannot recall where exactly we had met. The space and the time were tricking me and puzzling me with their potent and flexible arms.

The more I connected my sight to hers, the more I felt dizzy, and the less I could get from this weird communication. Her body incessantly transmitted to me warm and familiar pulses while her vision, her expression, and her soul kept poking me with her mind-reading power and her combustible hysteria. I moved back several steps as if I had gotten hurt by this unknown virus.

This is when I started to love New York, I think; she had created an illusory world in front of me.

When I stepped out of this cubic, clean, and white museum, the white lights from the room shone upon my body, and at the same time, another ray of white light shot into my mind.

I knew the woman! She had lain prone on the floor in the 798 Dashanzi Art Zone in Beijing, raising her bottom up high, and she was made of white porcelain enamel.

I didn't go out of the museum voluntarily. Actually, I was expelled by the guard of the museum who followed after me and focused his attention on me while I was visiting. He chased after me and concealed himself behind my back. He was just like a notorious and vexing pseudo-policeman I encountered in Dashanzi Art Zone in Beijing, a unique art zone that was exclusively developed for creating and imagining, but whose air is still mixed with uneasy

scrutiny and disturbed surveillance. Neither did these two men speak nor did they do anything violent. They just followed my paces, hinting to me that it was time to leave. I knew it was time to go, and I was just about to do so.

As the guard threw me out of the old woman's utopian, fragile world, I burst back to the world where I chase after the beauty of life. I thought it was New York at first. But the farther I darted into it, the more I could feel the yellow cabs and the crowded skyscrapers, the closer I could touch the dirt of the Oriental ancient capital. I breathed the Atlantic gale that blew from Siberia; I saw rains and snows and dirt mixed together draining along Broadway all the way to a boulevard in the Summer Palace in Beijing. I was cold, but I didn't feel the inclemency anymore. I felt familiar and cozy.

What a dangerous beauty. What a beautiful danger.

What I had just seen, which should have been dazzlingly beautiful, decayed and withered; the fantasy that New York City bears, which I have been craving for a long time, popped up and evaporated into a vacuum.

Maybe that is not because I have fallen in love with New York, but because I have already found the shadows of home, or, another home, a place where my soul breathes, a haven where my memories sleep fretfully, a garden where my life sprouts. Maybe I did not find the beauty I have been desiring in New York. The real beauty is buried deep in my heart, a haven that cherishes my memories so much, a cradle that protects my feelings, my loves, my hatreds, my excitements, and my tears perfectly well, so that any tiny stimulus that triggers my nerves can easily sink me into a world in which I can see the beautiful and dense history of my past life tangling with the artful reality of my new life—the folded history being shadowed by the ever-unveiling reality.

WORKS CITED

- Aciman, Andre. "Shadow Cities." *Writing the Essay: Art in the World, The World Through Art*. Ed. Darlene A. Forrest, Pat C. Hoy II and Randy Martin. New York: McGraw-Hill, 423-35.
- Empire*. Dir. Andy Warhol. 1964.
- Warhol, Andy. *Chairman Mao*. 1975. Juming Museum, Taipei.