

Did Someone Say “Crowd”? The Dis/Appearance of the Political Mass in Contemporary China

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It feels remote, but it’s so familiar, too.
—Yu Hua 2011: 3

In his recent book *China in Ten Words*, novelist Yu Hua begins his personalized keywords account of contemporary China with a short piece on *renmin*, or “the people.” He opens with the reflection “I can’t think of another expression in the modern Chinese language that is such an anomaly—ubiquitous yet somehow invisible.” The piece goes on to elaborate on this anomalous condition of *renmin*, describing the weighty omnipresence of the word during his youth in the Cultural Revolution and its current disaggregation, when “the already faded concept that was ‘the people’” is sliced into ever smaller pieces—“netizens, stock traders, fund holders, celebrity fans, laid-off workers, migrant laborers, and so on” (2011: 6). Yet, although both the socialist-era and market-era uses of the “the people” have rendered the term “a shell company utilized by different eras to position different products on the marketplace,” and although “the people themselves seldom use the term” (7), Yu suggests that the memory of its enunciation and enactment is still at the heart of what deserves to be

called the political in this postrevolutionary era. Indeed, his essay ends with an almost phantasmal yet intensely “real life encounter” (13) with “the people,” “disengaged from all linguistic, sociological, or anthropological theories and definitions” (13), where the word takes on flesh in the form of a human aggregate—a *political crowd* on the edges of Tiananmen square in the summer of 1989: He recalls shivering as he cycled home one cold night during the time martial law was instituted and people were forming barricades to protect demonstrators from the army, until he suddenly felt “a current of warm air” sweep over him. Then,

An astonishing scene appeared before me. Now bathed in warmth, I could see the intersection flooded with light; ten thousand people must have been standing guard on the bridge and the approach road beneath. They were fervid with passion, lustily singing the national anthem under the night sky: “With our flesh and blood we will build a new great wall! Arise, arise, arise! United we stand...”

Packed together, they gave off a blast of heat, as though every one of them was a blazing torch. (14)

Yu describes this encounter as “a key moment” in his life, when he discovered for himself what “the people” means—that is, “when the people stand as one, their voices carry farther than light and their heat is carried farther still” (14).

Yu Hua’s recollection and intimate re-animation of “the people” in the form of a political crowd—specifically here as an aggregate of bodies united in action in public space—from a monumental moment in recent Chinese history provoke many questions. His encounter returns us to one of the primary scenes lying at the heart of modern Chinese cultural and political imaginations, where an intellectual fatefully encounters the erupting crowds, as seen in such key texts of the early twentieth century as Ye Shaojun’s *Schoolmaster Ni Huanzhi* (1928) and Mao Dun’s *Rainbow* (1930).¹ It also evokes the idea of artistic production in reconfiguring collective and political subjectivities. At the same time, the past-tense

¹ For more on the theme of the intellectual’s encounter with the crowds in early twentieth-century literature, see, for example, the studies by Anderson (1990: 180–203), Tang (2000: 97–130), Laughlin (2002: 75–113), and Xiao (2012).

description of his encounter with an “already faded concept” (Yu 2011: 6) points to the disavowal of the political that characterizes China’s postsocialist modernity. As Yu writes, only months after the June 1989 state crackdown on protestors, the scenes of mass public political action disappeared from the media and, seemingly, from the public imaginary, as the whole nation embraced a “passion for getting rich” (2011: 6). Yet, Yu’s discussion of how his experience with political assembly continues to inform his sense of self and world, along with the stories he goes on to tell of unexpected emergences of politicized “people” from the margins of the mainstream, questions any simple narrative of disappearance. Ultimately, then, Yu’s essay suggests that the lure, experience, and language of political collectivity that so pervaded China’s revolutionary “short twentieth century” (Wang Hui 2006: 683) continues to reappear in multiple guises and from multiple locations—in officialdom or state-coordinated ritual and exhibition, as popular media spectacle, as personal or collective nostalgia and memory, as artistic imagination, and as grassroots social or political practice—sometimes drawing on that history and sometimes in entirely new formations. The condition of the dis/appearance of the political crowd in contemporary China, evoked here by Yu Hua, is the topic of this special issue. In the instability between a revolutionary past and a postrevolutionary present, between the dust of seemingly bygone causes and the persistent emergence of forms of social and political enunciation, lies a potential for reexamining the figure of the crowd—at a time when, to borrow Yu Hua’s (2011: 3) words, “it feels remote, but it’s so familiar, too.”

The past few years have witnessed what Paul Mason (2012) describes as an era of “new global revolutions” that are “kicking off everywhere.” Large political movements calling for regime change and reactivating historical public spaces and the notion of “the people” in the Middle East, or involving occupations of state legislatures, financial districts, and public parks in the Occupy movement or similar movements in Turkey and Brazil, have occurred alongside frequent grassroots labor strikes, creative

forms of cellphone-rallied “flash-mobs,” as well as ethnic, generational, and economic-based riots in many places around the world, including China. Although mass demonstrations have always existed, there is a new visibility to such aggregated action across the spectrum of media, in the arts, and in everyday spaces. The new visibility is enhanced not only by the scale of many of these demonstrations, the level of institutional repression they have met, and their intimate connection to new digital media technology, but also because it has long been asserted that we live in a postmodern, “post-political” (Žižek 1999: 195–204) age of bodily disaggregation, virtual encounters, “spectacular gestures” (Schnapp/Tiewis 2006: x), and consumer identification, in which, when political crowds do appear, they do so under “an ever-deepening patina of otherness and anachronism” (xi). As Jean Baudrillard (1983: 20) already pronounced in the 1980s, in a mediatized era of simulation, “the masses are no longer a referent because they no longer belong to the order of representation.” The recent reemergence of collective movements, however, suggests that such obituaries for the political crowd are premature: indeed, over the past decade, there has been a wave of critical and theoretical scholarship examining the character of today’s social and political movements, their modes of physical assembly, and possible forms of “community,” in relation to longer-standing imaginations and practices of political collectivity—“the masses,” “classes,” and “the people”—from what has been called the modern “era of crowds” (Schnapp 2006: 3).

Haun Saussy (2006: 256) reminds us that “China’s history from 1900 onward has been an Age of Crowds, punctuated by explosions of crowd energy.” Looking beyond the purview of an isolated national story, China emerges as central both to the practices and imaginaries that animated the golden age of political crowds in the twentieth century and to their current state of dis/appearance within the new structures of global economic integration, cultural production and consumption, and political entanglement. In this special issue, we ponder what new questions may

be posed when we resituate the history and theory of political crowds in modern and contemporary China in a more global frame, and bring together scholarship dealing with the meaning of political collectivity in its historical and current configurations from both within and outside the putative boundaries of China studies.

Much of the early to mid-twentieth century in China, as elsewhere, was defined by the presence and visibility of “crowds” in new forms of living, working, and congregating in urban, industrializing locales as well as by the language and practices of collective political action, the politicization of public space (indeed, its very redefinition as such), and the intimate connection between new mass media, socially conscious art, and the making of collective subjectivities. The modern crowd emerged as history’s protagonist in an era of popular sovereignty, industrialization, mass migration, and new forms of collective action. According to turn-of-the-twentieth-century social critics such as Gustave Le Bon (1897: 1–14), one of the defining features of the modern crowd was its *unity* out of heterogeneity, attested to not only by the different imagined political communities of the twentieth century, including the nation, the people, and class, but also in the vast gallery of images illustrating expressions of political discontent and power in the one voice or body arising from the many. The fascist mass panoramic photography, in which the disciplined crowd becomes one with/in the body of the leader, is but one example (Schnapp 2006).

Although the crowd, as a consequence of the triumph of the modern model of politics built on the physical massing of bodies in public places, has been represented as the cornerstone of the legitimacy of modern mass “dreamworlds,” including the vision of the “people” as sovereign, these dreamworlds have also undeniably led to various “catastrophic forms of modern political life” (Buck-Morss 2000: 32). The utopian unity underlying conceptions of collectivity is haunted by the specter of totalitarian modes of enforced identification and catastrophic forms of political terror. But,

even if these totalitarian specters and their accompanying monumental forms of representation stand out in our contemporary understanding of the political crowds of the twentieth century, is that the entirety of what defined the experience and representation of political collectivity in this history? The era of political crowds may also lead us to reflect on the processes through which individuals become politically active, take to the streets, and begin to sense the power of collective action through experiences of public assembly. Although the art and literature linked to the mass dreams of the twentieth century have been implicated in the aestheticization of modernity's violence, they can also lead us to reimagine how the terms "masses," "classes," "the people," and "citizens" provide a powerful language for the making of social and political solidarity. A study of the "dis/appearance of the political crowd" in modern and contemporary China thus requires an examination of the politics of political art that, as Jacques Rancière (2010: 149) reminds us, goes beyond a narrow focus on the representations of political struggles and violence, and instead explores how aesthetic reconfigurations "contribute to the constitution of a form of commonsense that is 'polemical,' to a new landscape of the visible, the sayable and the doable."

What is at stake in confronting both the challenges and the possibilities presented by modern revolutionary history, generally, and by modern political crowds, in particular? Contending with what he calls the "radical negation" of the political in post-Cultural Revolution China's popular and intellectual cultural spheres, Wang Hui identifies the crises of the twentieth century not in the processes of politicization but in what he terms the processes of depoliticized politics (2006: 685). The challenge, he shows, is to comprehend how and why the critical political cultures, social activism, and mobilization of active subjective political outlooks that marked the "revolutionary century" were also always accompanied by tendencies toward elite power struggle over political debate, bureaucratization, and binary forms of factionalism over autonomous social organization

and discursive freedom—tendencies that became more entrenched in the 1960s (689–690). Indeed for Wang, after the 1960s and especially by the 1990s, both socialist and liberal democratic models have seen the effects of debilitating depoliticization in the form of nonrepresentative political parties, a global discourse of “stability” over dissent, and the creation of ossified forms of identity: “[A]ll forms of twentieth-century political subjectivity—party, class, nation—face a crisis of depoliticization” (700).

One aspect of depoliticization in the contemporary PRC is the party-state’s hegemony over the interpretation of revolutionary history and the language of socialism. The essay by Hongmei Yu in this issue addresses this situation of interpretative hegemony through an analysis of the historical narratives presented in post-1989 state-sponsored “main melody” films. In particular, Yu shows that whereas in the films of the 1950s “the people” or political crowds were depicted as agents (albeit under the guidance of the Party) of history, in the films of the 1990s they appear as silent masses on display in scenes geared toward visual spectacle. The agents of history in main melody films, which Yu argues are emblematic of a postsocialist ideological reorientation, are great leaders and other remarkable individuals. Alongside their focus on individual personalities, these films downplay radical political action by people during major historical events, such as the 1919 May Fourth movement, while valorizing the efforts of high-level diplomats.

The main melody films that Yu analyzes operate in a wider cultural space in which the imagery of political collectivity has either actively disappeared from the mainstream media or been relegated to a historical past citizens are expected to celebrate but not reenact for themselves.² The continual display of and reference to revolutionary history and socialist concepts in official public discourse have contradictory consequences, however: despite the party-state’s attempts at interpretative control for its own ends, groups such as peasants and workers continue to make their appeals for justice and rights to the state by deploying references to this history and language.³

² One recent example is the Red Songs movement of spring and summer 2011, started in Chongqing by provincial authorities to stir up collective revolutionary spirit in time for the ninetieth anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party. Although the movement was embraced quite enthusiastically throughout the country, the state became anxious about the mushrooming of “independent” Red Songs groups and tried to limit which songs could be sung and who could lead the groups. See also Wang Chaohua’s (2008) discussion of the CCP’s attempts to suppress study societies and critical groups that take their inspiration and names from similar groups that formed the foundations of the Party’s own early history in the 1920s.

³ For example, during the 2011 protests in the village of Wukan in Guangdong, the villagers creatively appropriated the language of the state to get their demands met without seeming to challenge the political order, although their actual protest could very well have been seen that way. The images were reminiscent of Mao-era village meetings, but these were not choreographed by the state or local authorities, emerging rather out of the protest movement itself.

Can we connect such ongoing appropriations of revolutionary history and the language of socialism to the call by left-wing intellectuals such as Wang Hui (2006: 699) for the “reactivation of twentieth-century China’s historical legacy” as one means toward an “opening for the development of a future politics”? For Wang, such a reactivation cannot simply be an unexamined “doorway back to the twentieth century,” but rather must be accompanied by “a redefinition of the boundaries of politics itself” (699): “If we can say that at the heart of depoliticization is the subversion and weakening of political values, then the road to repoliticization must lead through a reconstruction of political space and political lives” (700). Roy Chan’s essay in this issue confronts questions of reengaging the experiences of political collectivity activated in the socialist period to imagine the possibilities for a new “socialist futurity.” Chan focuses on the presentation of “politico-affective space” in the works of writer Zong Pu, especially her 1978 story, “A Dream for Strings.” This story’s construction of a political collectivity within a dream, argues Chan, not only reveals the need to critically reflect on the destructive collectivities and their modes of representation that emerged as part of the revolutionary heritage, but also gives voice to yearnings for a different type of socialist future. Central to this yearning is the activation of the elementary processes that give rise to solidarity and political collectivity in the first place—namely, affective processes that connect seemingly individual situations, desires, and despairs to those of others’ experiences—rather than a simple reactivation of ready-made political narratives or appeals to already assumed communities.

Chan ends his essay by reflecting on the “faint and lingering cry for the common” emerging in China today. Apart from the challenges presented in reclaiming revolutionary history and politics, we live in a time in which the populace’s ability for deep political reflection is incapacitated (Wang Hui 2006: 690) by a global “postmodern post politics” marked by “the reduction of the State to a mere police-agent servicing the (consensually established) needs of market forces and multiculturalist tolerant humanitarianism”

(Žižek 1999: 199). Perhaps one of the most telling signs of this wider realm of postpolitical consensus in China is the changing meaning of the term *guangchang*, as Dai Jinhua (2002: 217) reminds us, from connoting a politicized public space to a commercial shopping “plaza”—a part of the landscape of a “generic, homogenous world metropolis” defined by “superhighways, chain stores, skyscrapers . . . and flows of happy consumers.” As “the image of happy consumers in the plaza has replaced the image of angry citizens at the Tiananmen *guangchang*,” Dai points out, the message is “No more mass movements and political rallies (either for the government or against it), and no more leadership by the elite culture or elite intellectuals. Rather, leisure, shopping, and consuming serve the important function of mobilizing and organizing Chinese society” (221).

Is the crowd still visible through this “new marketplace rhetoric intermingled with memories of the revolution” (Dai 2002: 213)? What are the social implications of this new landscape defined by “bodily disaggregation and media aggregation” (Schnapp/Tiewes 2006: xi)? Just as an earlier era of revolutionary politics created its own crowds, today’s unequal societal arrangements and structures of transnational capital produce a different set of, supposedly “postpolitical,” crowds—dispersed and disposable workforces, consumable digital masses, shoppers milling around plazas, and virtual communities gathered online from disaggregated private spaces. Although the removal of “the production of the conditions of production (the reproduction of the means and forces of production) from the process of production,” as Wang Hui (2006: 693) points out, is central to such processes, any critique of the forces of global capital requires a denaturalization of such crowds through close attention precisely to the conditions of their production. In his essay in this issue, Jason McGrath takes up the phenomenon of “digital multitudes” and the representation of people as “human pixels” in Chinese director Zhang Yimou’s recent cinematic spectacles, especially his controversial film *Hero* and his choreography of the opening and closing ceremonies of the 2008

Beijing Olympics. McGrath first illustrates how both participate in the new trend of technology-enabled awe- or fear-inspiring crowds in cinema, mapping out the conditions of their production and what undergirds this aspect of the contemporary global popular cultural imaginary of crowds. Second, McGrath argues that what may be most salient to Zhang's work is its presentation of the harmony and irresistibility of the logic of an integrated global capitalist economy and the valorization of Chinese workers in this system. He leaves us with this question: Can the actual conditions of Chinese workers within a system of global labor arbitrage or the creative and critical reception of Zhang's *Hero* by audiences disrupt this visual, narrative, and structural logic?

Joining McGrath's provocation over the relationship between homogenizing forces and the possible formation of collectivities that can resist them is Louis Ho's study of contemporary Chinese visual artist Yue Minjun's practice of figural repetition. Ho places Yue Minjun's work in the context of 1990s Chinese artists' disillusionment with the political potential of art and the celebration of the expressive individual (which fueled artistic creation in the 1980s) in the face of a relentlessly commodifying cultural landscape imbued with the power of the "monolithic state." Ho shows how Yue's endless duplication of a figure based on self-portrait takes up the question of the individual and its subsumption into a homogenized mass, and particularly raises the issue of uniformity and centralization in China's history—from the Qin emperor to cult of Mao—and perhaps more globally in the panopticon-like visual power of the modern state. Like McGrath, Ho forces us to ask whether Yue's duplicated selves, which may be read as a critical response to these powerful effects of visibility, can disrupt those effects through parody or through exposing the mechanisms of power.

Although McGrath and Ho may leave us ambivalent about the potential of "repetitions" or critical audiences to disrupt the logic of harmonious, homogenizing, or even disaggregated crowds created by powerful global economic and political forces, other theorists, such as Michael Hardt and

Antonio Negri (2000), have attempted to reveal new forms of political collectivity arising out of precisely such conditions of global capitalist "network power" and economic/political consensus. Hardt and Negri name this new form of political collectivity "the multitude," which they argue is "the living alternative that grows within Empire" (2004: xiii). Deploying metaphors of the digital age, they describe the multitude as arising from "new circuits of cooperation and collaboration that stretch across nations and continents and allow an unlimited number of encounters" (xiii). Against older forms of collectivity such as "the people," "the masses," "classes," and "crowds," which, they argue, value sameness over differences, rely on leaders, and are susceptible to external manipulation (100), the new "multitude" is a form of collectivity that comes together not as a "social body" but as a "social flesh," with all its differences intact and with external boundaries that are always "open to new nodes and new relationships" (xv).

Although Hardt and Negri have been criticized for positing "an anarchic array of singularities" that cannot be the basis for an effective politics (Robbins 2010), others have taken up their attempt to think through possibilities for nonexclusionary, nonauthoritarian forms of political collectivity in our contemporary age. The many descriptions of the Tahrir Square protests in 2011 or the Occupy movements have celebrated not only their leaderlessness and open communities, but also "the forms of sociability and new 'horizontal relations' created through daily shared work and organization that break down existing social divisions" (Butler 2011). It is not just the building of new types of social relationships within these movements that has intrigued observers, but also the locations in which these practices are enacted. As Judith Butler argues, although these movements have reclaimed the historical public square for the people and wrested it away from being a space legitimizing existing regimes, they have also resignified other spaces as public and political, with important consequences:

As much as we must insist on their being material conditions for

public assembly and public speech. . . . [w]hen crowds move outside the square . . . politics is no longer defined as the exclusive business of a public sphere as distinct from a private one, but it crosses the line again and again, bringing attention to the way politics is already in the home, on the street, or in the neighborhood, or, indeed, in those virtual spaces that are unbound by the architecture of the public square. (2011)

Such actions, Butler notes, via Hannah Arendt (1958), change the “space of appearance” in which the crowd acts and “reconfigures what will be public, and what will be the space of politics.” Changing the “space of appearance” here also means challenging not just what is considered political, but also who can speak politically, who has the “right to have rights.”⁴

⁴ For more on the idea of “the right to have rights,” see Arendt 1958: 177. See also Balibar 2004 on the concepts of *droit de cité* and “civility.”

In her essay in this issue, Chun Chun Ting tells us a fascinating story of the summer of 2007, when two old colonial-era piers in Hong Kong were turned into just such a new “space of appearance” that gave rise to an alternative envisioning of the city’s future and rekindled the decolonization project through which a new Hong Kong subject could come into being. Bringing to light what she calls a “radicalized understanding of heritage conservation,” Ting shows how the Local Action movement both challenged notions of Hong Kong’s commercial capitalist destiny and wrested the meaning of the piers away from being symbols of the colonial era to being both historical and contemporary public spaces. The “public” to whom these piers belonged, she goes on to argue, was a diverse and open-ended set of users, who, in their different modes of using and inhabiting a common space, could be articulated as having a “common ownership and destiny.” Through her analysis, Ting shifts our attention to moments of active appropriation of everyday space by a citizenry.

Indeed, as Wang Chaohua (2008) has pointed out, although one can say current Chinese society is “depoliticized by the smooth talking of neo-liberal free market principles,” it has also to be remembered that “its people did not take [this path] without a fight.” Even in the current

depoliticized and commercial landscape, argues Wang, “the masses have been constantly mobilized into political action by the daily transformations in their lives” (2008). Chinese citizens have not only created new locations from which to summon crowds but also invented particularly contemporary modes of collective political action to resist “vested interests by developers, business owners and government officials,” rising costs of living, as well as environmental degradation (2008). We can ask how these actions, small as they may seem, act as important moments of political subjectivization, and do indeed open up the possibility for the creation of what Rancière has called new forms of “the visible,” “sayable,” and “doable” through enacting instances of “disagreement” or “dissensus” to powerful modes of consensus (Rancière 2010). But, even though the street and the square continue to be spaces in which the meaning of the political and of collectivity are fought over, what about other arenas of social life such as the arts or, indeed, other spaces such as virtual ones?

Although cultural producers from the 1980s on seemingly bid “farewell to revolution” (Li/Liu 1997), declaring their autonomy from the political, this separation of the cultural and the political has happened even while art and literature themselves have *continued* to be political in diverse ways.⁵ The essays by Roy Chan, Chun Chun Ting, and Louis Ho all highlight the ways in which the aesthetic reconfigures “specific orders of visibility and sense through which the political division into assigned roles and defined parts manifests itself” (Hinderlitter et al. 2009: 1). Whereas Ting shows how art performances were central to the enunciation of the piers as living, open spaces where a diversity of individuals with contending voices could come together to create something common, and Chan presents Zong Pu’s fiction as positing a template to reclaim a socialist vision, Ho’s analysis of Yue Minjun’s work reveals the way art can participate in “partitioning the sensible,” to use Rancière’s term (2010: 36–44). Ho argues that Yue Minjun’s work disrupts a form of consensus created through the effects of homogenizing modes of “vernacular visibility”—the ways of looking

⁵ See Wu (2005: 184–186) for a concise discussion of such an interplay between depoliticized conceptions of arts and their continuing political engagement.

that structure what can be seen and how it is seen in everyday life—by transforming its power through confrontational and parodic repetition.

Art practices and their social effects, in the sense of creating a new cultural “imaginary” and new types of solidarity, community, and collectivity, are central to many of the essays in this issue. Similar questions have been asked about the new independent documentary film movement in China and the people brought together through online and social media groups, which, by revealing the everyday lived reality and voices of many marginalized social groups and individuals, create the possibility for new social relationships and forms of solidarity among authors, subjects, and audiences.⁶ In her essay in this issue, Sarah Dauncey draws our attention to the formation of the “the disabled crowd” in contemporary China. Dauncey shows that although a state-led discourse of disability has powerfully informed personal and collective understandings of what it means to be disabled in China, those who have been designated disabled have also spoken out to rearticulate their identification or lack of identification with a disabled collectivity, while redefining the contours of that identity. Dauncey’s work highlights the ways in which collective formation is contested rather than stable. Her essay particularly focuses on literary and other forms of expression by disabled individuals and communities online, showing how this new platform has created new opportunities for individual and group self-representation. By connecting with each other online, Dauncey shows, disabled individuals have been able to share their experiences and transform people’s understandings of disability. Here, virtual space, rather than being a lesser form of collective assembly portending the dilution of the political power of the people as effected through physical assembly in public space, emerges as a possible new “space of appearance” for subjects and experiences heretofore marginalized to reshape collective understandings of the social. To the analysis of the contested making of the “disabled crowd,” and the locations through which new forms of belonging are enacted, we can also consider

⁶ See Berry, Lu, and Rofel 2010 for more on these aspects of the current independent documentary movement.

the collective emergence and self-representation of other social groups who have used platforms such as the Internet or DV-camera technology to contest the ways in which dominant social and state narratives define them; these include the burgeoning LGBTQ community in China, as well as women factory workers—the “working sisters” or *dagongmei*—and other migrant workers.⁷

But are these new collectivities *political* crowds? Is growing social awareness the same as political consciousness? To these questions, we would hazard a tentative “yes,” in the sense that these phenomena are an aspect of what Roy Chan, via Jonathan Flatley, sees as processes of “affective mapping” and solidarity-building through which seemingly disconnected individuals differently situated within a field of divisions and hierarchies confront and comprehend the social world in new ways. We would say that these processes are already “political,” but they also lay the crucial groundwork for collective political expression. The essays in this issue present instances of such collective emergence and the powerful forces, including cultural imaginaries, supporting, negating, or producing them. To the type of collectivities examined in the papers here, we would also raise the question of how to bring into the conversation the existence of political crowds and communities based on nationalistic, ethnic, or other types of identity that foment a politics of exclusion and/or division. In China specifically, we may ask how divisive collective identifications and the hierarchies they institutionalize have led to riots and violence from those marginalized by them, for example in the regions of Tibet and Xinjiang. How do we bring these political crowds into the purview of the theoretical analyses presented in this issue? Certainly deeper and broader processes of affective mapping, understandings of the divisions created by contemporary conditions and the building of social solidarity across these divisions, need to occur. Although these marginalized political crowds have attempted to “disrupt” hegemonic forms of “consensus,” they have largely yet to be heard in precisely these terms. The same may be said about the people

⁷ See Jaguscik (2011) for more on the tensions between the mainstream cultural and divergent self-representations of and by the *dagongmei*. For one interesting analysis of how a short documentary recording a dyke march in Los Angeles has presented new opportunities for the expression of *tongzhi* (queer) political collectivity in a transnational space in China, see Chao 2010: 92–96.

most marginalized by the current global economic system and oppressed by the effects of environmental degradation and who have expressed their discontent in different formations of “the crowd.”

In this special issue, we have considered the possibility for such processes to occur in the very condition of the disappearance of the political crowd in contemporary China. Between “disappearing” and new forms of “appearing,” can we imagine the advent of a politics of the common based on what Jean-Luc Nancy has called “co-appearing” or “compearance”?⁸ In a work describing a different historical moment in which people assumedly divided by the hierarchies of imperialism disrupted its logics through different forms of solidarity, Leela Gandhi (2006: 20) has argued that “co-appearance” “requires of its agents a qualifying ethico-existential capacity for the radical expropriation of identity in the face of the other—a capacity, that is, for self-othering.” Indeed, to be with/in a crowd and to think along with/through a crowd may require just such a capacity.

Wang Chaohua’s critical afterword resituates the relevance of the essays in this issue in terms of a longer history of the meaning of political crowds in a transnational context. This special issue also resonates with the work of many other scholars exploring questions of political collectivity in contemporary China. We see these questions as an urgent concern in our times, and we hope this issue will lead to continued dialogue. We thank all those who submitted essays and provoked in us so much thinking around the topic of political crowds, and we would especially like to thank the *MCLC* editor, Kirk A. Denton, for his incredible support, encouragement, and patience in bringing this issue to fruition.

⁸ See, for example, Nancy 1992.

Glossary

dagongmei	打工妹
guangchang	广场
Mao Dun	茅盾
renmin	人民
Tiananmen guangchang	天安门广场
tongzhi	同志
Ye Shaojun	叶绍钧
Yue Minjun	岳敏君
Zhang Yimou	张艺谋
Zong Pu	宗璞

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