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Destroying the Remembered and Recovering the Forgotten in *Chai*

Between Traditionalism and Modernity in Beijing

ZHAO XUDONG AND DURAN BELL

Abstract Beijing is currently undergoing a host of dramatic changes, as reflected in the popular symbol *chai* (拆). *Chai* means destruction; but it also refers to antiquated things or ideas that should be destroyed. By presenting *chai*, one is able to arouse into memory certain forgotten things that previously rested in the background. However, the reconstructed forgotten memories that one actually remembers differ from the actually forgotten. In this way prevailing Chinese conceptions of contemporary social transformations can be configured into recollections of constructed images of the past; and the past can be lost while being remembered. In this article, this process of creative remembering and forgetting will be illustrated by reference to changes in customs and residential ownership. We shall argue that traditionalism and modernity in contemporary China should be seen as circular transformations between remembering and forgetting.

Keywords modernity, tradition, mental representation

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Those who visit Beijing today will find the Chinese character *chai* (拆), meaning “demolition,” on walls along the great streets and small paths of the city. A large and imposing Chinese character, it is usually presented in white and enclosed within a large circle. Superficially, the symbol indicates simply that the structure on which it appears is planned for destruction. As such, it is a warning to those who may be affected by its disappearance, promising an improvement that requires the loss of a physical structure. However, the character *chai* is arguably symbolic of a broader reality in Beijing. We shall

argue that its underlying meaning reflects a Chinese logic of social construction that is based on destruction and a social memory based on forgetting. It would appear to represent the current mental state of the Chinese people.

Although *chai* is an ancient Chinese word, it has assumed new implications and greater significance during the last century. One may say that the modern history of China has been paralleled linguistically by the history of *chai*. Although the long history of China has presented many dramatic political and social changes, the last century has been quite exceptional in its turbulence. It is as though the entire society has carried *chai* before it in a continuing struggle to address an intrusion of Western culture and power. The simple denotations of “old” (*jiu*) and “new” (*xin*) became overlaid by ethical valuations that legitimated a destruction of many elements of the old China for the sake of the new. In this context, *chai* refers to replacement and even to progress.

In the West, an ideology of progress replaced God or became a new god, according to Ernest Gellner.¹ However, China has emerged from a very different tradition where progress is represented by *chai*, by destruction. *Chai* embodies the “old” on its negative side and the “new” on the positive side. In the popular philosophy of modern China, the logic of *chai* is expressed ideologically as a dichotomy between *po* (destroyed) and *li* (rebuilt). In revolutionary times this dichotomy was interpreted as a form of Marxian dialectics. And in popular discourse in everyday life there are newly derived idioms, such as *po jiu li xin* (the new rebuilt after the old destroyed) and *bu po bu li* (not destroyed therefore not rebuilt).

Chai is connected to “forgetting.” In a society still living in the shadow of the Cultural Revolution, *chai* is a reminder of the age of collectivism. The symbol arouses an otherwise repressed memory of the *eagerly* forgotten, and reconfigures that memory into a new value-domain. In this way, a public memory of the turbulent events of the recent past can be labeled with *chai* and forgotten (destroyed), while concurrently those *forgotten* past events can re-emerge through *chai*, to be reintroduced into memory as progress. It is a process of destroying the remembered and recovering the forgotten in *chai*.

Placing the character *chai* on an old building, marking it for demolition, arouses memories of revolutionary times, especially the destructive enthusiasm of the Cultural Revolution. People recollect the pleasure of destruction that they experienced within the mass mobilization movements of that time; and when they see the character *chai*, they can re-experience some of that political enthusiasm. And in spite of a currently negative official attitude

toward those revolutionary events, *chai* facilitates a nostalgia that displaces critical resistance and condemnation.² Accordingly, when *chai* is written today on the walls of the city, it connects to a thick memory of the excitement of past generations; and it resonates with the proud melodies of a revolutionary age—an age in which people legitimately and enthusiastically sought the destruction of the old world.

Beijing: a place full of public and mental representations

To overcome the claimed shortcomings of both structural and interpretative explanations, Sperber has developed a new model of cultural development.³ By reference to an “epidemiology of representations,” he posits a dynamic interplay of “mental representations” and “public representations” wherein publicly expressed manifestations of a culture induce corresponding “mental representations” of individuals, leading perhaps those individuals to promote altered public representations. According to Sperber,⁴ the evolution of representations is similar to the progress of an epidemic of influenza, absent the pathological implications; and he argues that this mechanism “explains culture”:



Figure 1 *Chai* written on a wall of Beijing, photographed by Zhao Xudong

An epidemiology of representations is a study of the causal chains in which these mental and public representations are involved: the construction or retrieval of mental representations may cause individuals to modify their physical environment—for instance, to produce a public representation. These modifications of the environment may cause other individuals to construct mental representations of their own; these new representations may be stored and later retrieved, and, in turn, cause the individuals who hold them to modify the environment, and so on.⁵

Here, a transformation process is stressed in explaining cultures. According to Sperber's theory, the public representations, or narratives, are connected with the mental representation, or stories, through causal chains, "Each mental version results from the interpretation of a public representation which is itself an expression of a mental representation."⁶

Sperber's model is useful for our understanding of the processes of transformation from traditionalism into modernity in Beijing. Beijing today is, no doubt more than at any other time, undergoing a great transformation. This process is led by the central government, which provides the public representations that signal changes in the social and physical environments. These public representations, such as *chai* placed on buildings and other structures, have consequences for the public mood that are often unintended and which may eventually affect perceptions of central decision makers who are themselves part of the public. It is reasonable to presume that the structures that are ultimately selected and embossed by *chai* are determined by a dynamic reciprocity of mental and public representations.

Some social theorists, such as Bauman and Smart,⁷ believe that Beijing is experiencing ambivalence due to the search for modernity. Our research suggests that in Beijing, this ambivalence is often caused by nostalgia of the past and by a resurrection of the past in the present—all of which is embodied in the character *chai*. *Chai* means that the memories of a personal and communal past may be forgotten and re-remembered as nameless and anonymous. According to Feuchtwang, Beijing could be waiting for a saved future.⁸

Making sense of *chai*: demolishing and preserving old things

About a century ago, the word "modern" (*xiandai*) entered the Chinese vocabulary. This word's arrival coincided with the decline of late imperial China and the adoption of an ideology of modernization.⁹ As an antonym of

xiandai, *chuantong* (tradition) was also invented, signifying all kinds of old things (*jiu dongxi*). However, among these *chuantong* some things are distinguished as *youliang chuantong* (fine tradition), which are considered worthy of preservation. And at the other extreme, there are things that most urgently need to be changed or eliminated, such as *lou su* (corrupt customs) and *fengjian mixin* (feudalism and superstition).

This tradition-modern dichotomy eventually became prominent in popular thought, where “tradition” implied the bad or backward, and “modern” implied the good (including fine tradition) or progress. Similarly, as Feuchtwang has shown, there has been the classic division between higher learning (*da xue*) and lower learning (*xiao xue*) which was also a principle of imperial government.¹⁰ Lower learning, or popular academic practice, has been slandered as “superstition, the unscientific versions, or sub-version, of the cosmos which continued to have currency from imperial times.” In imperial times, something that was valued ideologically was called *zhengtong* (orthodoxy) in contrast with *xie* (incorrect) or *yi* (heterodoxy). However, things that were *zhengtong* in one dynasty could become *xie* or *yi* in another. Thus, *chai* can be seen as a symbol which redefines the *currently perceived* boundary between *zhengtong* and *xie* or *yi*. This instability in ethical valuation has been evident during the last 100 years, as China moved through the imperial, Republic, revolutionary, and postrevolutionary periods—a floating set of redefinitions of the good and bad.

The Great Wall, for example, is no longer a military installation for the prevention of foreign invasion (*wai zu ru qin*). It has now been elevated to a new public representation of scenic and architectural beauty and tourism. However, during the Republican period of China, the Great Wall was associated ideologically with the dictatorship of the first emperor of the Qin dynasty (*Qin shi huang*). Once this emperor was condemned, the Great Wall was delegitimated and made subject to destruction. It is said that bricks of the Great Wall could be conveyed openly and legitimately as construction material for peasants’ homes nearby. In formal discourse the Great Wall was condemned as an ugly and valueless thing. In the current period, however, this same “ugly” wall is expected to arouse in a visitor’s mind a vision of Chinese integrity, fine tradition, and resilience. Hence, the meaning of the Great Wall as war and violence was destroyed as a mental representation so that several other public representations could evolve. In this way, traditions are subject to destruction and to reinvention as tradition.¹¹

The reinvention of a tradition does not restore the tradition that existed previously. The reinvented form can often have greater significance than its predecessor in the same way that a reunion after separation can be more significant than a never-disturbed union.¹² The dichotomy of separation and reunion can be translated roughly as destruction (*chai*) and construction (*jian*). Separation and reunion pertain primarily to human relationships, and they are celebrated on ritual occasions in China, such as the Lunar New Year and mid-Autumn festivals. Destruction and construction pertain to systems of social relation and to physical structures; and *chai*, embodying both destruction and construction, implies a social decision in which unfashionable things are marked out. Given a decision by central authority, certain old things are identified as bad in public representation and become subject to reevaluation in the mental representations of individuals.

In Beijing, as capital of both Imperial China and the People's Republic, various customs have been attacked in the name of *lou su* (bad customs). This discourse of condemnation has continued from 1911 into the contemporary period. For example, in the early 20th century, under the leadership of an American doctor, John B. Grant, traditional rituals dealing with death and birth affairs were reformed and transformed into the standard model of Western medicine (*xiyi*).¹³ Those traditional rituals once had been performed by *jie sheng po* (old midwife) and *yin yang sheng* (a man practicing yin-yang) in the event of birth or death, respectively. With the establishment of the so-called "hygiene model district" (*wei sheng shi fan qu*), the roles of *jie sheng po* and *yin yang sheng*, as public figures, were subverted. Consequently, *jie sheng po* and *yin yang sheng* disappeared in the big cities, although they may be found even today in rural villages.

Temples and altars were key elements in the cosmology of imperial Beijing; and the efforts to build a modern nation-state required an ethical and cognitive repositioning of them. Madeleine Yue Dong delineates this repositioning process in the reconstruction of Beijing, beginning with the time of the Republic.¹⁴ This modern China would be inhabited by new citizens (*xin shi min*) and not by the old subjects (*jiu chen min*) of the past; and the physical space of the city would reflect the change, especially in the reconstructions on the old sacred altars of the imperial state cult. The old *di tan* (the Earth Altar), for example, was reconstructed, changed to a public park, and renamed the Citizen's Park (*shimin gongyuan*), a secular place where citizens could enjoy their "body training" and other activities. The city governor Xue

Dubi expressed his intention to improve citizens' physical and spiritual health:

We should know that the survival of the nation depends on people's strength, and the people's strength depends on the spirit of bravery and competition. Our country developed the earliest [in the world], but we have not progressed in the past thousand years due to stagnation and low morale. It is painful to witness the weakening of the people, the invasion of powerful countries, and the decline of our nation. To promote sports activities and encourage people's morale should be our fundamental principle.¹⁵

The emphasis on body training continues today in Beijing, but with an interesting reemergence of tradition. In the name of traditional body training, the people in Beijing meet regularly in the public places today to express "new senses of religious community" in contrast with the purely secular emphasis of the Republican period.¹⁶ As an old thing, the image of the *tan* (altar) was destroyed in the revolutionary period, but now in the reform period, with the destruction of the collective unit (*danwei*), much new space has been created for forgotten public representations. In one's mind, those public representations are recognized and processed again with new meanings and significance. In effect, old things are being reborn and then worshiped and preserved within a transformed society.

At the turn of the second millennium, the China Millennium Monument (*Zhonghua shiji tan*) was completed near central Beijing. As the "Constructive Course" records:

It was named as monument, not only suggesting China's 5,000 years of civilization, but also embodying modern connotation, style and feeling with strong sense of the times, which made it totally different from the altar used by the ancients to sacrifice to Heaven.¹⁷

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China, a number of monuments were built to remember the heroes of wars and the historical events of the revolutionary period, such as the People's Heroes Monument (*renmin yingxiong jinian bei*) which is located in the middle of Tiananmen Square. In spite of its claim of "embodying a modern connotation," the new monuments can now be called *tan* (altar) and thereby arouse the people's destroyed memories of the imperial altars of Beijing which had been condemned as feudal and superstitious during the Cultural Revolution. In this way, a

memory of traditional altars can be recovered via their displacement with countertraditional interpretations.

Destroying homes, building condominiums

In Beijing, as in other cities in China, residences fall into three classifications. First, there are old bungalows (*jiu pingfang*), often inhabited by elderly persons who actually own the property; second, there are old multistory terraces (*lao loufang*), most of which belong to the state and can be allocated by administrators, leaders of work units, as perks for their staff or workers; and third there are relatively expensive new condominiums (*xin shangpin fang*) which emerged after the residential property reform in the late 1990s. These three residential categories were constructed in different times and represent different kinds of memory.

Jiu pingfang are associated in the memories of the common people with their lives in times past, relating perhaps to the time when China first faced European intrusion. *Lao loufang* are largely the product of the socialist state, burdened with the colors of socialist collectivism. And *xin shangpin fang* signal the emergence of a post-Mao reform, private property, and the ideology of Western capitalism. Many people in Beijing have become owners of single-family residences, a form of ownership not allowed in Mao's time. However, in making claims to this form of private property, the owners must suppress or forget the anathema that only recently would have been attached to such possession. It is indicative of a major shift in public representation that one's private house can be discussed openly among friends, colleagues, and relatives.

Similarly, the strongly negative Maoist conception of commodities has been *forgotten* in this post-Mao period. Now, commodities (*shangpin*) are being redefined as dynamic elements of the socialist state and are becoming public yardsticks of the reform process. Hence, commodities can now be *remembered* as a newly recovered memory of *chai*. In this sense, memory is evidently not only an individual learning, but it is also a social learning in social practice. Furthermore, the public memory of surplus value (*shengyu jiazhi*), which once implied despicable exploitation in a Marxian sense after China's liberation in 1949, is forgotten and transformed into its antithesis—use value (*shiyong jiazhi*). One even finds the image of Mao as the logo on many of the *privately* produced items that are manufactured in his home

village, Shaoshan.¹⁸ The incomes of the wealthy and powerful are thereby removed from the stigma of socialist illegitimacy. Those incomes become, instead, an indicator of a person's contribution to society.

By means of a transformational mechanism of destroying memory and recovering the forgotten, the condominiums (*shangpin fang*) of the well-to-do enter the mind as a new memory based on the logic of use value. It is presented as a symbol of wealth, ideological leadership, family life, and so on. At the same time, the humble bungalows and old terrace housing of workers have enjoyed new memories. Although most of the people that we interviewed thought little of their tumbledown houses (*po fangzi*), they tended to emphasize the fact that their residences will some day be expropriated by the state (*guojia*) and be transformed into *shangpin fang*, at which time they are likely to be compensated quite handsomely.

Sometimes, there is resistance by owners of bungalows to the development of high-rises, not on ethical or esthetic principles, but for the sake of gaining greater compensation from developers. These resisters are often referred to as *dingzihu* (nail or a flat refusal household) by advocates of urban development. In the spring of 1998, the development of the Lan Qiyang buildings required the demolition of 6.7 hectares of bungalows between Beijing University and Tsinghua University. In the final stage of the demolition, several so-called *dingzihu* would not accept for several months any legally feasible conditions for expropriation. During this process of resistance, the *dingzihu* drew slogans that expressed their resistance on the walls enclosing the building site. Some of these slogans were reminiscent of those that had been popular during the Cultural Revolution. Among them was "Requite blood with the blood debt!" (*xue zhai yao yong xue lai huan*). This slogan effectively refreshed forgotten memories of the past.

Many passers-by would smile upon noticing these slogans. Why did they smile? It would appear that the smiling indicated the arousal of forgotten memories that can now assume new forms in the present. It is a recovery of the other side of the forgotten past or a counter-forgetting recovery. Upon reading the slogans, many people said openly "Something like the Cultural Revolution is coming back!" Of course, this statement was entirely false, yet it carried an essential truth that resided in the imagination. The destroyed memories of the past were being recovered with new meanings in the present. It is a counter-forgetting recovery that elements of freedom and anarchism in the Cultural Revolution were being recalled. The Cultural Revolution produced two enduring effects on the popular mind. One effect is

a traumatic imprinting of revolutionary violence, and the other is feelings of pleasure in the anarchistic freedom of action. While official sources, the news media, and other sources have focused on the violence of the Cultural Revolution, assuring therefore that this aspect of it is remembered, the individual freedom and psychic release associated with that destruction and violence lack legitimacy, leading to a destruction of memory. In some sense, it is a circle from *chai* (destruction) to *jian* (construction) by which repressed memories are aroused into a new legitimacy, but in a process that leads to further destructions of memory.

Conclusion: forgetting into traditionalism and remembering into modernity

An avant-garde artist Zhang Dali has produced conceptual artworks, among which is the “Dialogue Series.” One of the photographs in this series has been popularly called “Destroying” Beijing. It depicts a large stylized portrait of a man’s head chiseled into a broken wall. However, there is a hole in the wall that allows the viewer to peer through the man’s head as it were and see the Imperial Palace and the Palace Museum in the distance. This artwork (fig. 2) is illustrative of the issues that we have been addressing.

The Imperial Palace is an obvious representation of tradition and the broken wall represents modernity. Tradition, situated in the dimly veiled distance, is in the process of being covered over—forgotten, but in the course of this destruction of memory China must experience an inchoate and broken modernity—broken and incomplete from its very beginning, in contrast with the tranquil and complete beauty of (fine) tradition. We know that Chinese tradition will remain even after the wall has been completed. But once the hole has been repaired, this tradition will be forever unseen and forgotten.

Since tradition is the foundation of the present, we are ambivalent about modernity—not certain that it is truly an advance over tradition. Perhaps the usefulness of the wall, when it has been completed, will justify its superimposition upon tradition; but perhaps not. These doubts about the benefits of social change and “progress” can be suppressed with a forgetting (of background) and a remembering (of foreground). The circle of forgetting-remembering-forgetting is a dynamic process where new authoritative public representations affect, and are affected by, the consequential changes in mental representations. As Dutton sensitively observed, “the cities of China become the cities of *Chai*.”¹⁹



Figure 2 “Destroying” Beijing, Dialogue Series by Zhang Dali (张大力“拆”北京)

Source: Gao, ed., *Zhang Dali, “Destroying,” Dialogue Series*.

Notes

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¹ Ernest Gellner, *Anthropology and Politics: Revolutions in the Sacred Grove* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).

² Stephan Feuchtwang, *Popular Religion in China: The Imperial Metaphor* (London: Curzon Press, 2001), 222–31.

³ Dan Sperber, *Explaining Culture: A Naturalistic Approach* (Oxford: Blackwell 1996).

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁷ Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (London: Polity Press, 1991); Barry Smart, *Facing Modernity: Ambivalence, Reflexivity and Morality* (London: SAGE, 1999).

⁸ Feuchtwang, *Popular Religion in China*, 24.

⁹ Mark Elvin, “Introduction,” in *The Chinese City between Two Worlds*, ed. Mark Elvin and G. William Skinner (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1974), 2.

¹⁰ Feuchtwang, *Popular Religion in China*, 38.

¹¹ Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

¹² Charles Stafford, *Separation and Reunion in Modern China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

¹³ Yang Nianqun, "'Sanansheng moshi' yu minguo chunian Beijing shengsi kongzhi kongjian de zhuanhuan" ("The model of John B. Grant" and the transformation of the control of birth and death spaces in Beijing during the early years of the republic), *Shehuixue yanjiu (Journal of sociological research)* 14, no. 4 (1999): 98–113.

¹⁴ Madeleine Yue Dong, "Defining Beiping: Urban Reconstruction and National Identity, 1928–1936," in *Remaking the Chinese City: Modernity and National Identity, 1900–1950*, ed. Joseph W. Esherick (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000), 121–38.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 129–30.

¹⁶ Feuchtwang, *Popular Religion in China*, 237.

¹⁷ China Millenium Monument, Constructive Course, 2000–2001, <<http://www.bj2000.org.cn/english/memorabilia.htm>>, accessed March 2005.

¹⁸ Michael Dutton, "Changing Landscapes, Changing Mentalities," in *Streetlife China*, ed. Michael Dutton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 222–3.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 222.

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Glossary

<i>bu po bu li</i>	不破不立
<i>chai</i>	拆
<i>chuan tong</i>	传统
<i>da xue</i>	大学
<i>dan wei</i>	单位
<i>di tan</i>	地坛
<i>ding zi hu</i>	钉子户
<i>feng jian mi xin</i>	封建迷信
<i>guo jia</i>	国家
<i>jian</i>	建
<i>jie sheng po</i>	接生婆
<i>jiu</i>	旧
<i>jiu chen min</i>	旧臣民
<i>jiu dong xi</i>	旧东西
<i>jiu ping fang</i>	旧平房
<i>lao lou fang</i>	老楼房
<i>li</i>	立
<i>lou su</i>	陋俗
<i>po</i>	破
<i>po fang zi</i>	破房子
<i>po jiu li xin</i>	破旧立新
<i>qin shi huang</i>	秦始皇
<i>ren min ying xiong ji nian bei</i>	人民英雄纪念碑
<i>shang pin</i>	商品
<i>shang pin fang</i>	商品房
Shaoshan	韶山

<i>sheng yu jia zhi</i>	剩余价值
<i>shi min gong yuan</i>	市民公园
<i>shi yong jia zhi</i>	使用价值
<i>tan</i>	坛
<i>wai zu ru qin</i>	外族入侵
<i>wei sheng shi fan qu</i>	卫生示范区
<i>xi yi</i>	西医
<i>xian dai</i>	现代
<i>xiao xue</i>	小学
<i>xie</i>	邪
<i>xin</i>	新
<i>xin shi min</i>	新市民
<i>xue zhai yao yong xue lai huan</i>	血债要用血来还
<i>yi</i>	异
<i>yin yang sheng</i>	阴阳生
<i>you liang chuan tong</i>	优良传统
Zhang Dali	张大力
<i>zheng tong</i>	正统
<i>zhong hua shi ji tan</i>	中华世纪坛
<i>xin shang pin fang</i>	新商品房