

Body Politics in Tang Zhigang's Paintings

By Guan Yuda

I . Resurgence of Childhood Memories

On a sunny afternoon in the autumn of 2003, I arrived in Kunming from Guiyang. There in the art studio on Xiba Road No.101, Chuangku, I met Tang Zhigang, who was affectionately addressed as “Head of Chuangku” by other artists in Kunming.

Before that, what I knew about him and his paintings was limited to tiny snippets from newspapers or art journals: born in an army family, having grown up with his parents in a work farm, later been in the army for a decade, tutoring children in painting, having ever painted humorless adults at meetings as well as laughing and joking children who intimate those adult “games”... Such broken and scattered impressions, with some “anecdotes” of the artist from Ye Yongqing, aroused in me great interest and curiosity towards Tang Zhigang and his art career. I had originally believed that such interest and curiosity would weaken as I got to know more and more about him. Unexpectedly, the more I know about the artist, the more I feel confused at his works. In art criticizing activities, the subject that a critic targets is expected to be one and unique. Such unique subject of criticism will question and challenge the habitual mode of criticism and directional thinking and finally trigger specific, fresh and smart criticism with more sensational pleasures. Yet, it is really a pity that such artists and works are too few. And in this bubbling age of art democratization, Tang Zhigang, with his works, is indeed a rare case of exception.

Tang's unique style is definitely close to his autobiography. Actually, works by any artist faithful to his soul and childhood memories will be, to some extent,

an autobiography. *Ties of Blood • An Extended Family*, the magnum opus of Zhang Xiaogang is an example. Different from Zhang's literator mettle of debonair, sentimental and reminiscent, Tang shows in his works, especially in his latest *Chinese Fairy Tales*, the mental state of an old naughty child who is instinctively irregular, cynical and maniac---despite their share something in common, i.e. persistent in expressing those unforgettable memories in the childhood.

Many critics have noticed the influence that Tang's childhood experiences and his army career have inserted over his art creation. However, in interpreting such influence from the social cultural background, they tend to simply define it as a political cultural phenomenon that particularly exists in China. Therefore, when Chinese contemporary art critics interpret Tang's works, they generally associate them with such politics-oriented Chinese ideology "signs" as "meetings", "PLA", "Vietnam War", etc. Such simplified practice makes Tang's works more like a "post-colonial" cultural product created by a westerner, as if they were picture illustrations of dramatic changes in contemporary Chinese society to serve western cultural hegemony in its novelty seeking and sightseeing, just like the "cynical realism" art boffo in Beijing several years ago. Concerning this point, Tang gave an implicit explanation of his intent in 1999 in his letter to Chen Tong, a writer and critic from Guangzhou. Tang said, "There are now quite many works representing children's life. Yet in contemporary art, children appear in many works merely as a symbol, having rather loose or vague connection with the reality. They might be employed to symbolize certain period or phase in the human society: it is growing or remains young forever. Of course, there may be many other opinions and utterances, for instance, 'it is associated with politics of certain period. The so-called *Child Politics* or *Child Games* is actually reflecting someone's attitudes towards the national politics and society. '" (Tang Zhigang: *Child Meetings*, see *Half Life in the Army* P48, Hanart TZ Gallery, Hong Kong, 2002)

I truly understand Tang's helplessness and sadness. I admire him so much for his cultural intent & strategy in creation of the *Chinese Fairy Tales*, no matter he is taking children as a symbol of certain period/phase, or to diversify our culture with diversified forms, or to establish an art system off the economic and cultural basis. All in all, Tang Zhigang is by no means an artist who simply plays "hide-and-seek" with formalism in the realism labyrinth. As a clear-headed and sagacious artist, Tang harbors his own ambition: "every day, I am thinking of how to expand myself to all directions." And his cynical criticism is directed towards confinement of logos and the discipline of human rights. According to Michel Foucault, such confinement and discipline exert influence over people in a most delicate and concealed way, controlling a huge population of jumbling, useless people moving blindly, turning their bodies and strength into diversified elements. "That is a kind of modest but suspicious power, a calculating and permanent operation mechanism." Such mechanism lays a foundation for logos control in the modern society.

Therefore in my opinion, Tang's art, especially his latest works, is not merely a revised copy of Neo-realism artistic thought, but a resurgence of his childhood memories. In the form of autobiography, Tang is telling stories of soul and humanity, on body and power, discipline and punishment, enslavement and celebration, etc. In his paintings, "children" and the scenes of them in games, as a metaphor or symbol of "certain period/phase in the human society", represent the body technology & body politics created by infinite logos, ubiquitous in such "community of discipline" as prisons, work farms, hospitals, schools, military camps, etc.

II . Work Farm & Military Camp: Bodies under discipline

From a set of writings under the title of *Memories* by Tang in 1999, I get to know that when he was only five years old, his father, considering his heavy work during the wartime, took him away from Yunnan military kindergarden and

sent him to Kunyang work farm, 60km away from Kunming city. There, Tang lived with his mother, a prison supervisor in that work farm. For nearly a decade from 1965 to 1974, Tang spent his childhood life together with prisoners in the work farm.

In 1976, 17-year-old Tang Zhigang graduated from senior high school and joined the People's Liberation Army. There he served for the Propaganda Team of the army and started his art creation. During that period, he once fought in the Vietnam War. He also attended advanced studies in art colleges for several times, taking courses in art creation. Till 1966 when the forces are demobilized, he became a professional artist and continued to live and work in the military camp for another decade.

I have good reasons for having taken so much trouble to enumerate all the above experiences of him: around two decades' unbelievable and legendary life & working experiences in the work farm, prison and military camp nearly account for the most important period in the growth of this artist thus have naturally left deep influence over his art creation.

In Michel Foucault's "Knowledge Pedigree" analysis on society, knowledge, power and discourse, such commonplace institutions and organizations as work farms, prisons, military camps, hospitals and schools etc. make up the basis elements of "body politics" in the modern society. The so-called modernity is nothing more than a new form of controlling and ruling. Both rational human and objective knowledge are product of this "modernity", the outcome of power control under certain social and historical conditions.

The disappearance of corporal punishment with appearance of education and discipline is a significant sign of the shift from a classical period to the modern society. Such a shift is by no means the purported protection of humanity by

enlightenment ideologists, but the birth of a new power mechanism that controls and shapes people' ideology. In essence, it is the replace of one form of "control" by that of another form. It appears to be a shift towards humanism; but in effect, a more effective rather than candid punishment mechanism has spread into depth of the society, which aims to rule people through controlling their ideology. The shift from open excruciation into education and discipline announces the occurrence of power/knowledge, i.e. a new type of knowledge that helps execute punishment in a better and more effective way.

In Tang's visible expressions of his "childhood memories", he never tires of telling us, in the tone of a mischievous boy, his extraordinary odd eye-accounts and stories in the work farm, prison and military camp during the two decades. For instance: the "spectacular" view of a dozen women prisoners running around in steam that his mother encountered when she first made her round in the prison kitchen; the "guys" who shoot the fine studhorses with slingshots or beat them with bamboo bars for they always expose their genitals in public; the ritualized masturbation show by Lame Chen, in reform through labor, appearing like a laborer with his hand holding a hoe-handle; the disgusting and heart-quaking life scenes of women prisoners in pitch-dark cinder ground; the old sapper mature pit in the battlefield "which covers an area of around 1.3 units with tall green trees around" where shit would fly in case of bombing.

I notice that most of his stories are about "body". To be accurate, they are about how the "bodies" get educated and disciplined in some special sites /organizations. The precondition for such discipline is the gradual recognition of human bodies as subject or target of powers in the classical ages: under the knowledge that "human is machine", bodies are seen as subjects of powers that can be controlled, employed, reformed or improved. The process of reforming and disciplining is to exert external control over the bodies and training them, among which the most important is to drill: to put into practice

such disciplines through continuous supervision on the “bodies” and possibly strict division of time, space and activity codes. The existence of disciplines spreads powers into every inch of the society and forms a network, which finally create or produce individuals with no creativity at all.

When it comes to specific paintings, the angles of view taken by him often differ a lot from the fixed patterns of military themes in our mind ---generally fateful military operations, wars of great historical significance or conceptualized singing of army men etc.--- examples including *Soldiers* and *Portraits* sets created from 1979 to 1989, as well as others reflecting troops life such as *On the Way of Field Training*, *Provisions*, *Teahouse*, *Stream*, *Field*, *Drill*, *Physical Examination*, *Killing Pigs*, *After Class*, etc. Artist Mao Xuhui, a friend of Tang, was sharp enough to first notice this point and in his writing *A Song to the Soldiers* he called the *Soldiers' Soul* series created in 1984 “a spiritual gift on life and death”. He also noted, “it is such humanism spirit of loving people and caring for their life that has been leading the artist in his art career of nearly a decade.” Such sincere and honest remark is indeed to the point, comparing with certain critics that randomly and mechanically applying concepts. However, one thing in Mao’s remark worth questioning is whether the so-called “humanism” concept of value based on enlightenment and logos is another form of reforming and disciplining in “body politics”? “Humanism has been leading the artist in his art career of nearly a decade” : such judgment probably seems too simple to hold water.

What confused me is that scenes in work farms or prisons have never appeared in Tang’s paintings. Such childhood memories that may be remembered to the end of his life have been guiding his art creations. Now that the artist represented them again and again in literal form, why didn’t he paint them out on his canvas? This is perhaps because he started learning to paint only after he joined the army. In the military camp, disciplines are reiterated

over and over again so as to be strengthened and in such a institution reform or education simply equals drills. Probably it is just such an environment that activated his childhood memories that had been hushed for years like an extinct volcano. Yet the “eruption” we saw was no abrupt at all but happened at a most proper time after gradual accumulation of force and strategies as well as witty waiting and seeking for this ideal opportunity of “eruption”.

III. *Chinese Fairy Tales* and “Micro-politics”

Meetings-concerned paintings have so far occupied a very significant position in Tang’s art creation thus have become a sign flag from which people can tell Tang’s distinct personal style.

“Meetings” is a most ordinary and common political scene in Chinese social life. It is also a public space for displaying various “body politics”, power pursuit and shows: significant as Red Guards assemblies on Tiananmen Square during the Cultural Revolution days and insignificant as a secret meeting at an outskirts resort by several party officials from certain institution. It can be said that the “meetings” phenomenon is rather rich in associated meanings, reflecting social politics and body powers. Tang’s choices of such themes are naturally connected with his particular experiences: his childhood memories of having meetings in the military meeting hall after eight every evening in the 1960s and 70s, and later in the Propaganda Team having to moving about to take photos at meetings. Yet, what we cannot deny is that the “eruption” of the artist this time is out of cogitative cultural selection and judgment.

At this point, Tang is levelheaded. In the article *Child Meetings*, he said, “I have been tutoring children in art for around a decade till now. That is why I have chosen to paint children in my works. My studio is the classroom; the scenes of ‘meetings’ in the army I have painted are all from children who raise their hands to answer my questions. To associate one with another is so natural that

everything seems accidental. But it is only after serious considerations that I finally decided to choose children as a special sign. And such a choice is not purely aiming to escape from censure.”

In 1999, Tang finished the *Adult Meetings* series. After that, he instantly changed the leading roles of his pictures to children all dressed in military uniform or Sun yat-sen's uniform of smaller size. Although “meetings” do not only happen in the army, “the freedom that he enjoys in the monk-like troop life is absolutely less than any other open social life may allow. However, it is just the troop life that keeps him from taking art simply as a way of emotion releasing. In this "Child Meetings " series, the child appear in the canvas with serious but theatrical mask of humor, in replace of those army men with badges and official images who have been symbolizing power, position, courage, honor and loftiness in our society. The background setting is also made simple as a rostrum decorated with a huge piece of red cloth, simple but dazzling, creating strong sense of undeniable authorities. Such a scene obviously pulls artistic work away from real life, creating a distance between the two. Those critics, who actively target at the ideologies reflected in the works, also have to trace down the weak and tiny link between that distance till they come to a kind of civilian's sense of humor.

Anyone is believed to have experienced in their childhood such a game where children play the roles of adults. Yet, the real intent Tang holds in this set of works is not to, as a grown-up, sing sadly about “the passing childhood never to come again”. “Child meetings” is a serious display of game rules in the adult world of powers. It is also a strategy where Tang skillfully employs micro-politics of body powers to serve his art creation. Bravery and ruthlessness competing in body violence, schemes and intrigues of all kinds, poker-faced humans with deceitful masks, etc. are all converted into a comedy through his deliberately designed “meeting games” full of merry laughter and

cursing jokes. Viewers of the pictures always give a smile for they get to know the associated meanings: the artist is expressing something serious in the disciplined society in the form of child games and only the real “children” can enjoy the “games” after the bitter smile.

In this disciplined society, the task of disciplining is to create “new” human beings, i.e. to create obedient ones according to the requirement of the powers. Therefore, with each individual scattered in the all-round network of social powers, any kind of interpersonal relations is actually a kind of power relation and individuals are always in a position of gloomy helplessness. All subjectivity is actually visual since individuals exist in this social power network and always get categorized, rejected, formulated, isolated, stipulated and standardized by that network. However, what if each individual chooses to change actively rather than be forced to change and to successfully control their ego through individual freedom and liberation? Is it possible in such cases to develop a “micro-politics” where diversity can resist uniformity?

A micro-politics is anti-systematic, anti-central and diversified. It attaches much emphasis on subject activeness in action and attempts to develop its own critical strategies in two anti-discourse forms: firstly, the “discourse politics”, i.e. Groups on the edge of the society try to liberate themselves and gain individual freedom through fighting against the hegemony discourse which confines them to standardized disciplines; secondly, “biological politics”, i.e. the individuals get away from the disciplining power, trying to remold their bodies through new forms of desire and sensational pleasure thus overturn the standardized norms of subject recognition and consciousness.

Seen from this angle, Tang’s *Chinese Fairy Tales* is penetrating the society through “sensational pleasure” and “desire” which has been uplifted to a cultural and political level. This is a subversive strategy of body politics, a

post-colonial strategy employed by contemporary art to peacefully overthrow the traditional concepts of value. Its significance is considered to be having solved to remold individual egos through deconstruction of the traditional values and ideas from an individual or micro perspective and finally created a dramatic “body politics” comedy similar to a “fools’ ship”. From all the works by Tang, especially his latest *Chinese Fairy Tales*, we may easily perceive his art and cultural ambition.

Michel Foucault once said that he was carried away by such point of view: “Life exists as aesthetic materials for art. ” In his last days, he came to ask, “why cannot individual’s life become artwork? It impresses me that our social art has become an object rather than something about persons or life. Now that a lamp or a house may all become artworks, why cannot our life? ” Similar to Foucault, Tang Zhigang was also reminding himself when he initiated the series of *Chinese Fairy Tales*, “The early works have come to the end of their life. They are curative, self-consoling and surefooted. But the new works make people worried, not confident and can never reach the end of their meanings.”

That is how came his latest works: *Chinese Fairy Tales*. The “child” in his autobiographical pictures slowly steps forward, gently and with great care, out of the meeting revenue---“panopticon”, as British philosopher Bentham calls it. He either stands on the plane wing, or looks down from the high diving platform, or sits with others in a circle to play at the beach... Anyway, he eventually tears off his “mask” at the “meetings”, getting free from the confinement of disciplines and actively releasing his new desires and sensational pleasures. Though he is still timidly casting glances right and left, he is “thinking of how to expand himself to all directions every day” (Tang Zhigang) and continuously searching for new breakthroughs.

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