YAN LI, PROTYPE FOR A NEW GENERATION

A TRIBUTE TO A FRIEND WHO CHANGED MY LIFE

NORMAN A. SPENCER

INVOCATION

A warrant is out for the arrest of Yan Li! Catch that man smelling of alcohol and cheap perfume. There he is, running over rooftops with paintbrushes and unfinished poems hanging out of his pockets. Jumping into a courtyard, sprinting through alleys, he escapes on to the open road. Meanwhile, beautiful girls and young women worry about his safety and secretly long for his embrace.

1

Once I received a request to pay tribute to Yan Li, I immediately heard sounds from the Motown song “Dancing in the Streets”, party song from 1960’s USA but also the unofficial anthem for the Civil Rights Movement. Black people all over the country were literally dancing in the streets. They had come out of their claustrophobic ghetto apartments and were claiming all of America’s streets as their own, and those like me on the left who supported them and participated in their struggles, were drifting out of our hideouts unafraid of the FBI, the Black List and the KKK. Some practiced Gandhi’s passive resistance to challenge racist laws. Others picked up guns in self - defense or rioted and burned down buildings to proclaim their dignity. At the same time, the “bad boys and girls” of the Black Arts Movement were reading poems to the revolutionary jazz of Albert Ayler, Archie Shepp and John Coltrane, what we use to call The New Thing, celebrating the beauty of their people and culture while unleashing their anger and rage at an oppressive social and political system.

These references are relevant to my subject, because in some important ways there are parallels between what was going on culturally and politically in the U.S from the late 1950s through the early 1970s and what occurred in China from the late 1970s through the early 1990s. Young writers, artists, intellectuals and later university students openly challenged the status quo in both countries and called for a transformation of their societies. Yan Li and his comrades, who were members of Xing Xing (Stars) and Jintian (Today), functioned as a cultural

activist vanguard. They inspired other Chinese who has recently entered or graduated from the newly reopened art academies, music conservatories, and film academy. And, simultaneously, established Chinese writers and intellectuals and some government officials were positioning themselves to make a U turn and engage in debate about how to create a new China. This period of frenzied analysis and discussion, now known as High Culture Fever, raged in Beijing throughout much of the 1980s.

The Xing Xing (Stars) and Jintian (Today) activists were among the first wave of writers and artists who called for a new modern culture and society that would promote artistic and personal freedom. Having survived the Cultural Revolution and with only a few years of formal education, they openly rejected the socialist propaganda art and literature of their youth. They came out of “hutong”, run down government apartment buildings, and factory dormitories in Beijing during the late 1970’s and early 1980s and reclaimed public spaces for themselves. They read modern poetry in historical ruins, held unofficial modern art shows, and danced to rock n’ roll in public parks, secretly posted slogans, poems and drawings on Democracy Wall and participated in the famous 1979 street demonstration for artistic freedom. And they were in some ways China’s first hipsters. They adopted the cool existential style of the actors and actresses in the international films they saw screened in foreign embassies, modeled themselves on some of the characters in the American and European novels they read. And they embraced the free life style of the rock n’ roll and jazz musicians they listened and danced to. They drank too much, got into too many fights and switched girlfriends and boyfriends more often than they needed, and back in their small rooms, out of sight of the public, they blatantly broke the sexual taboos of their time. A sense of freedom and spontaneity permeated their lives. They were young and reckless, lived for the moment, unafraid, and life seemed open ended.

2

Yan Li and I first met at Asia Society in NYC during the fall of 1999. We lived in adjacent neighborhoods in Brooklyn. N.Y. Both of our lives were at a standstill. I was suffering from chronic depression. My marriage seemed to be coming to an end, my daughter was in college, and I was bored with my professional life. All I looked forward to were the weekly sessions with my therapist who was a former film actress I use to dream about in my youth. Yan Li had a sense of direction with respect to his career as an artist and writer, but his wife lived in Shanghai, and NYC was not as exciting for him as it use to be, because many NYC based Chinese artists had returned to China, He was winding up his actives in NYC and was preparing to leave NYC for Shanghai to be with his family. What brought Yan Li and I together was our common interest in the new emerging Chinese contemporary culture. I had taught at the Tianjin Foreign Cultures University in 1982 and 1983 and was familiar with the Chinese writers from that period, many who were Yan Li’s personal friends, as well as the earlier writing from the May Fourth and New Culture Movement generation. During the late 1990’s, I taught

at a Chinese economics university on the outskirts of Beijing for two summers during which time I met and spent time with Chinese film directors, actors and actresses with the help of my friend Li Xun of China Film Archive. And back In NYC, I was reading translations of the novels of the new Chinese contemporary writers, attending screenings of Chinese films, old and new, which including the remarkable retrospective of Shanghai films from the 1920s, 1930s and early 1940's at the Guggenheim Museum. Like the lonely characters in Woody Allen's films, I could not help but shed tears at all of the tragic beauty on the big screen! These films were all a reminder I needed to change my life

I also had experiences with China's new alienated youth which was often the subject of the emerging Chinese independent film movement and the focus of many conversations with Yan Li. As a foreign teacher in Beijing, I had become a magnet for young female college students and teachers who were confused and unhappy with their lives. Sometimes I imagined I was a missionary sent to heal their fragmented souls or an actor playing a role in a film I didn't fully understand. One student climbed out of her second story dormitory window late at night to sleep next to me in my apartment to feel safe and secure. And when we took day trips outside of Beijing, she conspicuously sat in my lap with her arms around my neck whenever we had to wait outside of train stations. She blatantly defied conventional norms of social behavior, was contemptuous of her university education and read traditional Chinese novels and foreign literature in translation instead of studying economics. I also became friends with a young teacher. Once we spent a weekend together in a peasant's house in a village in the mountains. We bathed in a communal bathhouse and late at night held hands while I listened to her sad love stories. Another time we were arrested by the police in the early morning for illegally spending the night together in a "hutong" which was off limits to foreigners. These young women I met through my university. Others I met on my own. Once I walked into a temple to listen to Chinese opera. A beautiful young singer walked over to me, took my hand and guided me to a seat next to her. She did not seem alienated or lost, but she was certainly not afraid to break with convention and act spontaneously.

Most of my experiences in China matched Yan Li's. We spent hours together every weekend in his studio drinking, trading life experiences and providing the background for understanding them. Some times these meetings seemed like seminars where we discussed politics and culture. Other times they were like blues or jazz sessions where each one of us took solos, spoke for an hour at a time, as a way of gong as deep as we could into the primal experiences which shaped our lives. I talked about my life in Brazil and Africa, the racial discrimination and violence I witnessed in the American South, my involvement in African American liberation movements, my experience in the military during the Vietnam War, participation in the anti- war movement, membership in a Maoist political organization and my life in San Francisco during the late1960s at the height of the counter culture.

Yan Li talked about his experiences during the Cultural Revolution, the burning of his grandfather's valuable Chinese art collection, his grandfather's arrest and

subsequent suicide as well as his witnessing public executions, his time living alone in Beijing as a teenager while his parents were undergoing political reeducation in the countryside, his experience working in factories, involvement in the new underground art and literary movements in Beijing and his life in exile in NYC with Chinese artists, composers, writers, and film directors. Intertwined in these discussions were stories about his remarkable relationships with women. My image of Yan Li will always be of him riding a bicycle through the dimly lit streets of Beijing at night with a beautiful young woman sitting behind him with her arms tightly around his waist.

Before Yan Li left the U.S., we made a pledge to make a book together that would document his life in Beijing and New York City, and someday I would write about my experiences.

3

I'm not sure when Yan Li and I began spending time with Liu Sola in her Manhattan studio. I met Sola for the first time at the opening for the exhibition for the photography of Zhang Huan's naked performance art. The NYC Chinese art scene had picked up some after his arrival and Xu Bing's success. By this time, America was enthralled by Zhang Yimou films, Chinese memoirs and novels and was learning about the new Chinese contemporary art from magazines and art shows. China was fashionable again. Sola like Yan Li was preparing to return to China and would become along with Ai Weiwei and other Chinese who had lived in NYC a part of another wave of China's cultural awakening. She and Xing (Stars) artist Huang Rui, just back from Japan, would be among the first to move into 798 Art Factory but that was later in 2002

I don't remember much about the first time Yan Li and I first stopped by Sola's studio, but I certainly remember the feeling of Sola's welcoming smile and embrace. She immediately conjured up memories of the beautiful brown skinned girls in sandals and white dresses I use to slow dance with in Brazil when I was a teenager, and like the Afro-Brazilian priestesses I observed singing and dancing in front of their offerings to the sea along the beaches of Rio de Janeiro, she seemed mythic, to be in possession of primal energy and in touch with rhythms of nature. Strangely I felt I had finally come home after years of separation. This intuitive impression and imaginative leap was not that far off the mark, because I discovered later Sola embodied important influences in my life.

Sola already had a remarkable career by the time Yan Li and I walked into her studio. She had a degree in composition from Central Conservatory of Music, had close ties to Beijing's bohemian underground culture, and when she left China during the late1980s, she had written compositions influenced by Chinese and Western music. She had published influential novels and short stories and was a folk hero for China's urban alienated youth, In London, she formed a reggae band made up of British and Asian musicians, but after two years, she

moved to the U.S. first to Memphis, Tennessee and the Mississippi Delta region to explore the blues and gospel roots of her favorite American singers Otis Redding and Aretha Franklin, and then on to New York City where she met Ornette Coleman and very soon became active in NYC's avant-garde jazz scene. She performed and made recordings with some of America's most creative and influential musicians: Amina Claudia Myers, avant-garde jazz pianist with roots in gospel music and blues, Henry Threadgill, important saxophonist and jazz composer, James Blood Ulmer, guitarist, whose "Jazz is the Teacher, Funk is the Preacher" and "Are You Glad to be in America? " remain classics, Jerome Bailey, drummer for the popular funk, soul, rock band Parliament- Funkadelic and finally vocalist Umar Bin Hassan member of The Last Poets, a radical group of poets and musicians that mixed poetry with music.

I knew them all. I'd met them and heard them perform in jazz clubs, listened to their music on CDs; I'd interviewed their friends and fellow musicians. These African American musicians were from my generation with roots in the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, and we all shared a common friend Amiri Baraka, / Le Roi Jones, the nationally acclaimed writer and political activist who had been at the center of the NYC jazz scene for decades. Sola was getting ready to return to China, because she wanted to move in different directions. China would give her more opportunities to grow, and she must have sensed that avant-garde jazz in NYC had reached its peak, and it was time for her to move on.

Sola was the ideal person for Yan Li and I to spend time with. Old friends from Beijing during the late 1970s and early 1980s, she and Yan Li had many shared experiences, their circle of friends overlapped, and in interesting ways, their personalities were similar. They were open, friendly, had a wonderful sense of humor, but they were also serious, had moral integrity, were loyal to their friends and most importantly for me at that time, they were not afraid to take risks with their lives. What they also had in common were their good looks. Yan Li was known for being "hansom like a movie star", and Sola's beauty, elegance and sophistication was the kind you see on the big screen or read about in romantic novels. I enjoyed watching them together and liked to imagine what kind of parts would be given them if they were acting in films in Shanghai during the 1920's and 1930s. Sola and I also had much in common. We both felt connected emotionally and spiritually to the music, culture and life of black people in the U.S, we shared a common interest in the new Chinese culture, and I was interested in learning more about her life and artistic vision. Yan Li and Sola did most of the talking when we were all together. I listened, asked questions and occasionally entertained them with stories from my past.

4

Most people can pinpoint specific incidents or point to periods where their lives changed forever. There have been several in my life. Watching an armed

vigilante group of white southerners mounted on horseback ride up and down the streets of Selma, Alabama on Sunday afternoons after church to frighten and intimidate the black community is one. Standing on the bridge of a U.S war ship off the coast of North Vietnam in the evening and listening to the singing of a young Vietnamese girl whose voice had miraculously penetrated our public address system while I witnessed with tears in my eyes the terrible beauty of the rocket and gun fire aimed at the villages and small towns along the coastline is another one.

The year I spent on a sabbatical leave at China Communications University in 2001 and 2002 was also a life transforming experience. I was there to teach, to continue my project of meeting and taking photos of Chinese film directors, and I was also in Beijing to work on the Xing Xing (Stars) and Jintian (Today) book Yan Li and I planned to make. I understood it was time for me to do something with my life after some years of depression and passivity. I felt I had finally reentered the sea of life, and like a Balinese surfer, I was poised for action, waiting for the right wave. It came while I was in China that year. I paddled quickly lying on top of my surf board, stood up with arms raised for balance not worrying if it was going to be a smooth ride or instead I would fall and the force of the waves would ground me into the sand and crushed shells on the bottom of the ocean below. Yan Li and Sola had showed me their way for moving forward with their lives. It was up to me to find one for myself.

My first few months in Beijing were among the most intense and complicated ones I've ever had in my life. My father died. I was his only child, but had seen him only once in twenty years which amounted to the fall out from serious disagreements over the African American freedom movements and U.S. foreign policy. He had been a diplomat and a political military expert at the State Department and the War College. Like the May Fourth Generation in China of a much earlier period, politics had disrupted my personal and family life. There was also the 911 terrorist attack in the NYC. I was in the process of getting a divorce, and miraculously without warning I accidently fell in love with my Chinese translator. She was 19. I was 59. For the first time in years I felt free and uninhibited. We began by walking around holding hands late at night like teen agers, took trips together to other cities and once made love on the third bunk of a hard seat sleeper on a fast train from Beijing to Shanghai. When it ended a year and a half later, Peng Xiaolian, female film director, wrote, "We always knew it was too romantic to last." And Wu Wenguang, underground film director, had to negotiate the break up. He took me to a restaurant and said, "You shouldn't be sad. You are the last of the American romantics! You are lucky to have had that relationship in the first place!"

I was lucky. My young friend was bright, rebellious, knew a lot about contemporary Chinese culture and was willing to help me meet those who were active in it. That year we met and spent time with dozens of Chinese involved in the arts. I helped organize meetings of Xing Xing (Stars) and Jintian (Today) members for a documentary film about them. I looked up Liu Sola who had returned Beijing and was living in 798 factory as well as the Chinese writers,

artists and film people I'd met during the summers I'd lived on the outskirts of Beijing. Through the journalist Xiao Lu, we met many more. Most were the forerunners of the new independent film movement and the generation that followed in their wake.

That year cultural life in Beijing seemed to have reached a fever pitch. Everyone connected to it was trying to come up with ways to get around government censorship and to create more spaces for artistic freedom and self-expression. The First New Image Festival at Beijing Film Academy and The First Gay and Lesbian Film Festival at Beijing University screened important independent films, but these film festivals were eventually shut down by the government. I attended Wu Wenguang's unofficial screening of *Dancing with Farm Workers*, saw Jia Zhangke's *Xiao Wu* and *Platform* at private bars and attended the unofficial launching of the book *My Camera Doesn't Lie*, a collection of interviews with China's leading independent feature film directors. Yang Lina, Wang Fen and Ying Weiwei gave me copies of their first films so did Li Yu, Wang Xiaoshuai and Jia Zhangke. The most remarkable event I attended was a rehearsal of Wen Hui's Living Dance Theatre where the director took off all of her clothing, lay down on the floor and the members of her dance troupe pretended to eat her naked flesh. This performance captured for me the playful, electric and transgressive spirit that was often at the center of China's burgeoning underground culture at that time.

What stands out in my mind about this important moment in Chinese cultural history is that a wide array of Chinese were attending the same art openings and unofficial film festivals and screenings. This led to a sense of community and sometimes a collective euphoria about embracing a new culture that openly challenged restrictive social boundaries. I felt elated at the communal sense of solidarity and the belief that culture can change people's lives.

5

I have dreams derived from my teenage years in Rio de Janeirqo, Brazil whenever I undergo a major transition in my life. The ones I had in China begin with me swimming in the China Sea. A beautiful, naked, brown skinned sea goddess swims over to me. In her mouth is a double-edged object. One end is a knife. The other is a key. She passes it on to me with a kiss. There is a lively party underway on the beach made up of the Chinese I've met and would like to know better. It's understood I can join them, but only after I dive deeply into the ocean and undergo a rite of purification. The knife is for fighting off demons, the enemies who conspire to destroy me. The key is for opening the treasure box that contains my lost soul that is sitting at the bottom of the ocean.

This kind of enlightened journey, of course, never ends except when one finally faces death and is lucky enough to see one's entire life flash before one's eyes. I had managed to join the group I imagined enjoying themselves on the beach by

the time I left Beijing, but I was an outsider, observing the excitement from a distance. It had been a struggle to get this far, and it remained to be seen whether or not I would ever make it inside their circle.

One of the most difficult phases of my life began when I returned to the U.S. I was alone, divorced, the chronic depression I conquered the year before returned, I had few friends, was emotionally tied to the life I left behind, but miraculously, friends from China passed through. Wu Wenguang, Wen Hui and their dance troupe spent time in NYC. I attended most of their rehearsals and performances as well as the lively social events associated with their tour. One was in my Brooklyn house where I hugged and held hands with the female dancers to feel more connected to them and their world. At another one, Wu Wenguang played a joke, told me in front of Tan Dun, the world acclaimed composer, that a Chinese woman in NYC was spreading malicious gossip about me which turned out not to be true. Later I asked Mian Mian, the female writer, about Wu's behavior. She said I should consider it an honor, because it was Wu's way to induct me into the macho world of Beijing male artists and film directors. She went on to describe her experience after she published her first novel CANDY. Wu invited her to a dinner with several of his friends. Once everyone was seated, he launched a devastating attack on her novel, but when she was on the verge of tears, he walked over to her, put his arms around her and told her they all loved her book.

Ning Ying, was in the U.S. on a grant from the Asia Council. I ran into her a couple of times, once when she was waiting to see the Hong Kong actress Maggie Cheung. And unexpectedly Liu Xiaojin arrived to screen her film at the Margarite Meade festival. We met a couple of years previously. This time there were more opportunities to get to know each other. Years later in Kunming Liu Xiaojin and I told her daughter Niu Niu the details of how we met and spent time together. After our story ended, Niu Niu said: "How romantic! You were meant to be friends."

I decided while I was reuniting with my friends from Beijing and Kunming that I couldn't remain in the U.S. forever. I had to pull myself together and return to China at least for the summer. I managed to find a teaching position in Shanghai, immediately went on line to meet Chinese female friends to hang out with and developed romantic feelings for one of them. She was 29. I was 61. I wrote to Yan Li and Mian Mian about my new relationship. Yan Li initially panicked. He wrote back: "It's time you climb off your roller coaster and live a normal life". And decided he had to meet my internet girlfriend and her family in person to make sure I didn't make a terrible mistake. Mian Mian's initial response was similar to Yan Li's. She wrote: "You have to be kidding! I'm a Shanghai girl. As soon as you arrive, bring her to me, and I can tell you in fifteen minuets if she is right for you". My teaching position was cancelled because of the SARS epidemic, but I decided to spend the summer in China anyway. Yan Li and Mian Mian were supportive of my relationship once they saw Xiaojian and me together so was Wu Wenguang when we had dinner with him in Kunming. Everyone seemed impressed by Xiaojian's natural beauty and joyful personality. We spent a month

traveling together in Yunnan province, decided after we returned to Shanghai to get married, had a communist civil ceremony in Shanghai in September 2003 and a Chinese family wedding in June, 2004. My adult daughter's reaction was simply: "At least your new wife is older than I am! " For the last ten years, Xiaojian and I have lived an interesting life together. We have collaborated on an ongoing project to interview and photograph Chinese and Vietnamese involved in the arts which has resulted in travel to Vietnam, Europe and various locations in China.

6

The XING XING (Stars) and JINTIAN (Today) book Yan Li had been working on came out in 2006. It focused on Yan Li's life during the late 1970s and early 1980s as a way to draw attention to China's underground cultural movements during that time and to a lesser extent it documented the life of Yan Li and other Chinese exiles in NYC. I was officially the editor, wrote the introduction and chose some of the photography. Originally a mainstream Chinese publisher was interested in it but told us later that it wouldn't pass government censorship. So it was officially published in Iran, printed in China and handed out to Chinese artists, critics, writers and friends as an "unofficial" or underground book

Many Chinese claim our book was influential for its time. There was a *Xing Xing* (Stars) exhibition in Beijing in 2007 with an impressive catalogue edited by Zhu Zhu, an important young art critic, which included work and commentary by Yan Li and an interview with me. Portions of the catalogue were published in a Chinese art magazine and in Bei Dao's cultural journal in Kong Kong. Other Xing Xing members published catalogues documenting their activities during the 1970's and early 1980s. Two important art exhibitions in New York City in 2011 and in Hong Kong in 2013 focused on *Xing Xing* and two important art critics, Gao Minglu and Lu Peng, included discussions of *Xing Xing* in their histories of Chinese art.

Yan Li and I achieved our goals I believe. Back in Yan Li's Brooklyn studio, we talked about the need to bring the discussion of Chinese culture in the 1980s back to its origins, Beijing and to two important interconnected cultural movements, Xing Xing (Stars) and Jintian (Today) which were responsible for launching new and experimental art and literary movements. They did more than simply break with the prevailing communist proletarian culture. They followed in the footsteps of prior generations of radical Chinese writers and artists who turned to the West for ideas and culled Chinese cultural traditions on the margins for new points of departure. Far from simply embracing and working through Western styles in art and literature as some have claimed, they cannibalized whatever they could use and made it their own. Like the modernist experiments of Latin American artists and writers, they used imported ideas and practices as tools for breaking outmoded forms and traditions, as weapons for exploding consciousness and bringing to light an imagination rooted in personal experience

which reflected the experience of an entire nation.

Yan Li's art and poetry best illustrates some of these tendencies I believe. There is a direct natural simplicity in his spontaneous surrealist style which often uses absurdist irony and humor to explore the human condition in its social specificity. And this in turn reflects Yan Li's strategy for life. Full of exuberance and passion, Yan Li has always been willing to take calculated risks and has been unafraid of their consequences. There has been continuity between his past and his present I leave it to art and literary critics and cultural historians to trace this development and comment on the different phases of his career. Needless to say, it has been a remarkable one, and Yan Li's best art and writing is as impressive as the work of many of China's most famous artists and writers.

7

I'm sitting in my house in minority village in the mountains of Dali, China where I can see the lake that my favorite American relative use to fly over as a "hump pilot" during the China - Burma - India Campaign in WW II. Xiaojian is in town visiting friends. I've been walking through my house looking at the Chinese art and film posters on the walls trying to come up with a way to end this tribute, and suddenly realize life has come full circle for me. Over the past few days, I have been drinking glass after glass of "baijiu" with Chinese writers and artists while trading stories from our past just like Yan Li and I use to do in his Brooklyn studio. It didn't take long before we could make connections between our life experiences despite the cultural and generation differences. But not everyone can understand the importance of these ties. Once, years ago, I was challenged by a U.S. based Chinese scholar for not having the credentials for understanding life in China. Yan Li encouraged me to speak out with a poem. I did. Now I use it as a summary on my life. Are there parallels between my life and the lives of Chinese active in 1979 and 1989? Let the reader decide!

PARTY CRASHING

(Prose poem)

"You don't have to be a weatherman to know which way the wind blows" ---- Bob Dylan

I gather there might be some mystery about my "credentials" for thrusting myself full force into dialogue with Chinese artists, writers, intellectuals, academics. I am going to try to clarify through analogy.

Invoking the dance metaphor, I've reentered the open circle, caught the rhythm, and am beginning to relearn the old moves. But my style is the fast free style of

Brazil, Africa and Black America, not that mannered slow style of Shanghai, which increases the risk of bumping into people and overturning tables. That has begun to happen, evidence of growing pains I hope.

But I've had these challenges before in my life. In Rio de Janeiro as a teenager, I was not afraid to go into the "favelas" to participate in the rituals of the poor and downtrodden. In the American South of Jim Crow, I blatantly took the risk of dancing with a young black women on an all white dance floor and came very close to being murdered for it. I danced with black "comrades" at SNCC meetings at the Highlander Folk School and later in "blues bars" after beatings and political confrontations.

Not long after that, in London, in exile, after being expelled from university for being “too dangerous”, Ted Hughes, British poet, former husband of Sylvia Plath, the American writer, and I danced and drank ourselves into oblivion on rooftops and in the green grasses of Hampstead Heath trying to blot out memories of murder and suicide.

During the Vietnam War, I tried to get as deep as I could into my rhythm with tears in my eyes as I watched the bombing of innocent people in the futile hope that I could wash away my guilt at participating in a war in which I supported the enemy's cause.

Back in London, years later, at a benefit for the ANC, I watched two black South African revolutionaries dance solo. I decided that if I were "for real" I had to join them. I did and didn't miss a step.

In Ghana, after a friend of mine, Kofi Awoonor, poet, intellectual and political activist, was released from prison, and after I had been arrested, interrogated and threatened with torture, the two of us traveled to his village to undergo "ritual cleansing". There we entered the "house of gods", stripped before them, paid our homage and joined peasant relatives in a communal dance.

Finally, at Amiri Baraka / LeRoi Jones’ 50th birthday, I was the only "pale face" in attendance to celebrate his life as a writer and political activist and felt comfortable enough to "get down" with his wife on the dance floor.

I haven’t danced often in China, but I have volunteered and undergone self-criticism, lived in "hutong" and been arrested for it. I have squatted in communal toilets, stripped and gotten naked with Chinese in bath houses, spent nights in peasant houses high up in the mountains, dined with amateur opera singers and spent mysterious nights traveling along the Suzhou river. I've also been able to hold my own in simple conversations with a wide array of Chinese people involved in the arts in Beijing and Shanghai

I have read books that have inspired and helped me understand the experiences I have just described. More importantly, I have sat before the feet of "the masters", the writers, artists, intellectuals, and film directors, and

have learned directly from the source. It's what I've been doing all my life. The time spent with Yan Li, Liu Sola, Mian Mian, Wu Wenguang, Wen Hui and Jia Zhangke comes naturally to me. It’s what I’ve been going my entire life.

Dali, China and New York City, USA 2013

Norman A. Spencer, Ph.D. has taught at universities in Africa, China and the United States. He has written about African, African American and West Indian culture and politics. He was the editor with Shirley Geok-Li Lim for the global literature anthology *One World of Literature* in 1993. He edited and wrote the introduction for Yan Li’s book *Things Are Symbols of Themselves* in 2006. An interview with him was published in Bei Dao’s *Jintian* cultural journal in 2007. And he published a photography memoir with commentary on Chinese independent cinema in the twentieth anniversary issue of *Positions: Asia Critique* in 2012. He is currently working on a photography journal that documents his life among Chinese and Vietnamese involved in the arts.