

## Editorial board

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## Censored on arrival

In 2015, artist, architect and anarchist Adrian Blackwell contributed a sculptural installation, *Mirrored Circles for Ba Jin*, to an exhibition of public art by four Canadian artists curated by Yan Wu ('Subtle Gesture' was an offsite contribution to that year's 'Shanghai Urban Space Art Season').<sup>1</sup> *Mirrored Circles for Ba Jin* was composed of six mirrored stainless-steel concentric circles elevated from the ground and sited throughout a small park in Shanghai's historical district (Xingguo Community Park). The width of each metal circular sculpture was such that it could be utilised as a bench for sitting, as a table, as something to lean on, or simply experienced as a mirror that activate one's awareness of the surrounding environment. Differently-sized circles facilitated different modes of interaction, depending on which circle was being utilised.

Blackwell conceived his work as a tribute to one of China's most well-known novelists, the anarchist activist Ba Jin (1904-2005). In the first half of the twentieth century, Ba Jin achieved great fame for a series of novels addressing the hierarchy and conservatism of Chinese society. His involvement in the anarchist movement dates to the 1920s, when he edited several anarchist journals, translated works by Emma Goldman and others into Chinese, and wrote political critiques of Lenin and the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat. His pen name, Ba Jin, was a Chinese-language amalgam of Peter Kropotkin and Mikhail Bakunin's last names.

Ba Jin was part of the resistance movement during Japan's occupation and protracted war against China (1937-45) and he continued publishing novels

until 1949, when the Chinese Communist Party established its dictatorship. Faced with a regime that lauded him as a socially-critical novelist but was hostile toward his politics, Ba Jin was forced to edit his stories, expunging all anarchist references. As pressure mounted, he officially renounced anarchism in 1958 and engaged in 'self-criticism' to protect himself and his family.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, during the 'Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution' (1966-76), he was targeted for intense persecution. In one incident, he was dragged into Shanghai's People's Stadium and forced to kneel on cut glass while thousands in the stands denounced him as a public enemy and traitor to Mao Zedong. The entire spectacle was televised and Ba Jin broke his silence only once, defiantly shouting, 'You have your thoughts and I have mine. This is the fact and you can't change it even if you kill me'. The heaviest blow came in 1972 when his wife, Xiao Shan, was denied medical care and died. Following government 'rehabilitation' in 1977, Ba Jin's literary accomplishments were again honoured. His last work was a multi-volume publication, *Random Thoughts* (five volumes, 1978-86), in which he pondered his life, literary works, and politics. Struck by Parkinson's disease in 1983, Ba Jin's health slowly declined and when he died in 2005 he was completely incapacitated.

Blackwell's installation included a didactic panel and container with bilingual (Mandarin/English) brochures. The brochure read as follows:

#### Mirrored Circles for Ba Jin – Adrian Blackwell

The piece is named after Ba Jin (1904-2005), a prominent writer and one of China's most outspoken anarchists, who lived just one block east of the park from 1956-2005. The circles speak to Ba Jin's anarchism, this form being the perfectly equitable form of all anarchist meetings. Their reflective surfaces point to Ba Jin's own long period of self-reflection, in his novels, his reports on revolutionary China, most poignantly in his long period of self-criticism during the cultural revolution, and finally in his plain and honest appraisal of the period in his memoir *Random Thoughts*. The Park is an extroverted mirror of his home's private grounds; within it, people of different life histories can find a common space of free association.

Additionally, it included a short biography identifying Blackwell as an anarchist and two quotes in which Ba Jin uses coded language to defend his right to free speech:

There is a small patch of grass in the front yard of my house, and a clump of trees as well as a few flowers out the back. I have been taking a short stroll

in this garden every day for the past 20 years, and apart from finding a few different varieties of plants with possible medicinal qualities I have not found one solitary 'poisonous weed' yet.

Ba Jin, *Random Thoughts*, 'Poison Weed Allergy', January 22, 1979

I do not think of my 'random thoughts' are particularly outstanding, they do however, *reflect my honest feelings and opinions*'.

Ba Jin, *Random Thoughts*, "Postscript", August 11, 1979

Reaction was not long in coming. Citing complaints, the district level government decreed *Mirrored Circles for Ba Jin* must be removed immediately. The exhibition, however, was adjudicated by the Shanghai Municipal Planning Department, which grew concerned about possible bad publicity and diplomatic repercussions, since the four participating artists were sponsored by the Canadian government. A compromise was reached. The panel was removed and the brochures were withdrawn, leaving six concentric circles to silently mirror anarchism's absence.

*Allan Antliff*

## NOTES

1. *Subtle Gesture: Canadian Art in Xu'hui 2015-09. 30 – 11,30*, exh. pamphlet (2015): 2-3.
2. The first volley against Ba Jin's anarchism and its impact on his novels was launched by the Communist literary critic Yao Wenyan (1931-2005). Wenyan served on the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (supervising its propaganda program) and was one of the infamous 'Gang of Four' who presided over the Cultural Revolution. The 'gang' (Wenyan, Mao's wife, Jiang Qing, Zhang Chunqiao, and Wang Hongwen) were stripped of power the month after Mao Zedong's death (October 6, 1976) and prosecuted for crimes committed during that tumultuous period. Wenyan was sentenced to twenty years imprisonment in 1981 and settled in Shanghai after his release. He died the same year as Ba Jin. See Yao Wenyan, 'On the Anarchist Ideas in Ba Jin's Novel Destruction', *Contemporary Chinese Thought* 46 (2015): 56-69 (translation). This article was originally published in *Zhongguo qingnian (China Youth)* 19, no. 203 (1958): 17-20.