

In and Out of the Spectacle: The Beijing Olympics and Yiyun Li's *The Vagrants*

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Olympic Sights

Before any athletic records got broken, rumours of the Beijing Olympics making history were already rife. Soon the numbers poured in, and with them, ever escalating claims about the event's magnitude. First, reports of nearly 70 million Americans tuning in established the opening ceremony as the "biggest television event since the Super Bowl" and the "most viewed ever" opening for a non-U.S. Olympics (Bauder). Next, news from elsewhere appeared, with estimates of the opening's global audience quickly jumping from a billion (Goldsmith; Swaine) to over two billion ("Beijing Olympics") to four billion (Yardley; "Most spectacular"). Whatever the actual numbers, August 8, 2008 turned out to be auspicious for records enthusiasts as much as Chinese folk believers. In the weeks that followed, media sources everywhere competed in scaling the heights on behalf of the Beijing Games, pronouncing it the "most-viewed event in United States television history" (Stelter), the "most viewed Olympics ever" ("Most Viewed"), and even the "most watched live event in human history"—given the key participation of hundreds of millions of viewers within mainland China itself. The opening ceremony was proclaimed as the world's first "genuine one billion" television program, besting ratings for the moon landings, Princess Diana's funeral, and President Obama's inauguration (Harris). In all these accounts, the prevailing tenor was that of jubilation, with a strong undercurrent of nostalgia for as much as anticipation of species unity, a planet united in a common experience.

That such yearnings and hopes for universality should manifest themselves via the People's Republic of China (PRC), the world's most populous nation, is not wholly unexpected. Beyond the numbers,

though, the fact that China remains the world's largest communist power should compel us to read these sentiments in a political light also, as signs, perhaps, of a liberal desire to see capital supersede communism and become finally, truly global, or else a compensatory imperialist fantasy arising from the West's nervous recognition that China is not only capitalizing but rapidly overtaking huge swaths of the world's markets. In this milieu, the PRC government itself has been busy promoting an image of the country as a "harmonious society" for years, both internally and internationally. The concept of harmony, *he*, signals that China is at peace with itself and at one with the world, capable of reconciling the contradictions of socialism and capitalism, and no longer ideologically mired in Maoist imperatives of class struggle. The concept had been used initially by Jiang Zemin and later became official Communist Party policy under Hu Jintao (Barmé 78), and the 2008 Olympics presented a timely opportunity to project this image far and wide—not least in order to repair the country's battered international reputation after a string of high-profile diplomatic disasters in the mid-2000s such as its involvement with the Sudanese government over the Darfur genocide (Kamm 224–25). So, throughout the 2008 Games, the notion of "harmony" repeatedly reared its head, emerging implicitly in the promotional motto of "One World, One Dream" and explicitly in the theme of the torch relay, "Harmonious Journey." During the opening ceremony, the word itself took centre stage in the scroll performance of movable type printing, as thousands of dancers moved in unison to exhibit, in spectacularly magnified form, the Chinese character *he* to admiring global audiences. The message was clear: China in the new millennium posed no threat to the world. Nor was the regime naïve in conveying this message, for it had enough savvy to display the word in three Chinese script styles, thus evoking the liberal multicultural ideal of unity in difference. Nonetheless, what transpired around the Beijing Olympics was not so much the realization of a cosmopolitan dream of one humanity as the world's eagerness to meet the communist state's self-portrait halfway. This was, above all, an event in global spectatorship where political difference had been agreeably left off-stage by all sides.

Undercutting this image of universal harmony, of course, were the numerous stories that materialized, both before and during the Games, about the human costs behind the glitter, the sights unseen that manufactured the spectacle. First the demolition: to make way for the Olympic sites, entire neighbourhoods were razed and over a million residents relocated in Beijing alone (Hom 68). Although Chinese law required development companies to compensate residents for the loss of their homes and businesses, the amounts were often set absurdly low and sometimes paid out to local authorities rather than evictees (van Lohuizen). Residents had little recourse to redress, as even the sector known as the Petitioners' Village, where thousands from around the country gathered to air grievances about local officials and appeal to the central authorities for help, was considered an "eyesore" and swiftly torn down; petitioners were expelled along with the homeless in a massive city clean-up operation (Kristof 20). Then came the reconstruction: to build the infrastructure for the Games across an area of 1.7 billion square feet, an "invisible army" of almost two million migrant workers was marshaled (Fong 172). Labouring under hazardous conditions and living in poor overcrowded barracks, earning as little as fifty cents an hour and frequently harassed with unpaid wages, these migrants did the grunt work of erecting the glamorous façade of the Olympics, from the famous Bird's Nest stadium to hosts of other sporting venues and five-star hotels, yet most of them will probably never have the chance to step inside one of their own handiworks (Fong 172–79; Han and Crothall 182–87). Indeed, soon after construction was completed, they were shuffled out of the capital and replaced by a more photogenic group: over a million volunteers, carefully vetted and largely selected from university students, who met strict physical and political criteria set by the central government (Brady 16–17). For instance, about three hundred young women were chosen to be award presenters based on their background (respectable university students), height (between 5'6" and 5'10"), age (18 to 25), and figure. As one administrator put it, "Since medal presenting is hard work, they not only need beautiful faces, but also they need to be strong enough" (qtd. in Fan). Beijing was literally given a facelift through population overhaul. But as many critics note,

beneath this veneer of beautification were the casualties, from evicted residents and migrant workers to the “rural millions who have sacrificed their well-being to pay for a half century of industrialization.” For its detractors, the Beijing Olympics was “essentially an aspiration for the elites ... built on a pyramid of sacrifices” (Bao 250–51), a “propaganda campaign” of “mass distraction ... designed to mobilize the population around a common goal, and distract them from more troubling issues” of the country’s social and political reality (Brady 1).

That the national spectacle can be deployed as a totalitarian tactic for mobilizing the masses is a familiar theme from the twentieth century, not least for the PRC. During the 2008 Olympics, this phenomenon attained an international scope, as domestic and foreign spectators alike marveled at the magnificence of capitalist China and momentarily went deaf on the myriad voices of complaint and dissent. So the story goes. And lest we become too blinded by appearances, a coalition of Western journalists, human rights advocates, academics, as well as Chinese political activists and analysts are prompt to remind us of the dark side of progress, to expose once again the PRC’s authoritarian maneuvers behind its capitalist dazzle. These two antithetical representations of China—as the incorporatable cultural frontier of globalization, or else the intransigent political other of democracy—mark the limit points of global perceptions of the PRC in our time.

Diasporizing the Spectacle

In this context, the Beijing Olympics falls neatly into an already entrenched political fault line between the communist state on the one hand and pro-democracy camps both within and outside China on the other. In the cultural sphere, many a Chinese writer in the West has established his or her literary identity in the past two decades precisely by entering into this political trench and siding solidly with the liberal critique of the PRC. A popular piece in their aesthetic arsenal is the Cultural Revolution memoir, the most well-known examples of which are Nien Cheng’s *Life and Death in Shanghai*, Jung Chung’s *Wild Swans*, and Anchee Min’s *Red Azalea*. More recently, fictions of the 1989 Tiananmen massacre have emerged as a uniquely formida-

ble genre, most notably Gao Xingjian's *Escape*, Hong Ying's *Summer of Betrayal*, Ha Jin's *The Crazy*, and Ma Jian's *Beijing Coma*. These writers go by an array of names, each with distinct connotations, to be sure: diasporic, exilic, expatriate, émigré, transnational, cosmopolitan, global Asian. Regardless of labels, though, they share a common trajectory, all having been born and raised in China and all now writing primarily or solely in the West, and many writing in the languages of the West. As I have argued in specific reference to the United States, the influx of a post-Tiananmen generation of PRC writers into the U.S. has significantly transformed the terrains of Asian-American and, by extension, American literature. The majority of these writers' works deal chiefly or exclusively with Chinese historical subject matters, so that the body of literature they produce is typified by a conspicuous absence of the U.S. as imagined geography. Coupled with this textual disappearance of America is the increasing visibility of China, now depicted less as a homeland rich in cultural traditions than as a country wrecked by totalitarian state power (Kong 145–47).

Arriving in the U.S. in 1996 and publishing her first short story in 2003, Yiyun Li is a relative latecomer to this literary scene but fits squarely within its lineage. Li, however, is no mere replica of her predecessors. In recent years, abundant claims have been made about the Chinese diaspora's function *vis-à-vis* Chineseness, whether in terms of the diaspora's "bicultural" (Ling) or "transcultural" (Quah) perspectives, its deconstructive potential for cultural identity and language use (Ang), or its decentering of the nation (Ong) or of geopolitical authority in Asia (Tu). These claims orbit Li in a generic or categorical manner, insofar as they apply to her historical and social situation, and hence the material conditions of her writing, without necessarily impinging on the content or vantage point of her work. Like Ha Jin, she came to the U.S. without an inkling of one day becoming a novelist here, much less in English, stumbling upon creative writing only belatedly. Yet this vocational deferral has perhaps allowed her to take good stock of the range of criticisms usually leveled at diaspora writers and to thereby skirt one of the most persistent charges: that of self-orientalism or self-exoticization.

Scholars have variously linked Chinese diasporic literature, especially by women, to a “cultural resurgence of orientalism” (Grice 104), whether via “dark age narratives” of the Mao era (Zhong et al. xxi) or “self-victimization” narratives that “capitaliz[e] on the authenticity of the suffering ‘I’” (Chen 30). Cultural Revolution memoirs in particular have come under intense fire, partly because of their immense commercial success with Western readers. In this circumstance, Li is lucid about her authorial stance: “I think [self-orientalism] happens, and I’m aware of it. But ... I don’t write for that reason. I’m not going to satisfy people’s curiosity about exotic China, or exotic Asians” (qtd. in Edemariam). Thus far, Li has strategically and deftly avoided most of the standard backdrops of the diasporic *mise en scene*—the mass starvation of the Great Famine, the horrors of the Cultural Revolution, the military slaughter around Tiananmen Square—focusing instead on lesser known episodes and rarely told locales of communist history. Nonetheless, she is always insistent on the political meanings that filter down to saturate the lives of small actors. In this regard, her first novel is exemplary, not least in the way it dissects the micro-mechanics of the totalitarian spectacle—just one year after the Beijing Olympics.

The Vagrants is set in neither an urban center nor a dirt village, the customary polar landscapes of diasporic tales, but a fictional provincial city of eighty thousand unglamorously called Muddy River. The time is the late 1970s, several years after the Cultural Revolution’s end but a decade before the Tiananmen protest movement, arguably the two most recounted historical events in diasporic literature. What Li makes prominent for her Anglophone readers here, in fact, is a moment that has been relegated to the blanks of world memory of China, at once an afterlife to the Mao era and a forerunner to Tiananmen: the 1978–79 Democracy Wall Movement that was the immediate precursor to 1989. Significantly, Beijing as much as the key actors in this national drama surface within Li’s pages only as rumours and asides, news from a remote elsewhere, even as their proceedings bear inexorably down on her provincial characters and unify them as subjects to the same central power. In this sense, Li remains unmistakably a writer of the nation, continuing a well-worn tradition in modern Chinese literature that has

been famously dubbed an “obsession with China” (Hsia 533–54). At the same time, she joins the swelling ranks of diaspora writers who trenchantly turn this tradition back against the current ruling regime.

Muddy River further localizes Li's critique. A new city only twenty years old, it was a “development planned to industrialize the rural area,” so its inhabitants are all “recent immigrants from villages near and far” (9–10). This city of immigrants differs from the metropolis and the village in its quality of contingency, of uncohesion and provisionality, for its residents do not self-identify as a special breed of urbanites like Beijingers or Shanghainese, nor do they feel a deep-rooted allegiance to the place as an ancestral or tribal home. To live in Muddy River is to lack a local identity that tugs at one's core loyalty, an identity strong enough to rival the hailing of the nation. Muddy River, then, designates a space highly susceptible to the ideological production of the national subject. This feature is also what makes possible Li's description of the town as devoid of singularity, as utterly representative on the grid of national power:

... the end of 1978 and the beginning of 1979 were auspicious for Muddy River as well as for the nation.... News of national policies to develop technology and the economy was delivered by rooftop loudspeakers in cities and the countryside alike, and if a man was to travel from one town to the next, he would find himself, like the blind beggar mapping this part of the province near Muddy River with his old fiddle and his aged legs, awakened at sunrise and then lulled to sleep at sundown by the same news read by different announcers; spring after ten long years of winter, these beautiful voices sang in chorus, forecasting a new Communist era full of love and progress. (10)

Underlying this ironic invocation of “a new Communist era full of love and progress” is a certain allusion to the PRC's projection of itself *vis-à-vis* the 2008 Olympics. Li subtly suggests here that the contemporary rhetoric of communist newness, of love and progress, is neither new nor epochally defining, that the Deng Xiaoping era of liberalization thirty years ago not merely preceded but enabled China's success as a global

capitalist power today. *The Vagrants* redirects our attention from this present-day macro success to its political prehistory at the micro level, both geographically and subjectively.

The novel then plays out the contest of power between the national and the local in this moment of PRC history. As activists in Beijing mounted their calls for democracy and freedom, at first at Deng's urging as part of his bid for gaining supremacy within the Party, then menacingly mushrooming into an anti-communist protest movement, the central government attempted to re-exert its control not just in the national capital but also in the provinces. Muddy River reflects the turbulence in Beijing as experienced on the smaller stages of national life. Accordingly, the novel is divided into three parts: first a state execution, as the micro theater of central power; then an organized protest, as the people's countertheater against state authority; and finally a crackdown, signaling the decisive collapse of democratic resistance. This pattern roughly prefigures 1989's Tiananmen, which Li surely has in mind. Here as in the later Square, the spectacle is summoned not unilaterally as a totalitarian technique but bilaterally as a potent means of popular subversion and rebellion. The novel therefore gets at the heart of the contemporary image war over China by spotlighting these alternative political spectacles to the Beijing Olympics. Narratively, they unfold as affairs internal to the nation, but materially, they are now displaced into an English-language text for non-domestic readers. This split in the aesthetic representation of the totalitarian spectacle is constitutive of much Chinese diasporic literature of our time.

Yet what concerns me here is not the substance or accuracy of these spectacles but Li's portrayal of the spying that occurs backstage. The narrative component that most forcefully drives her novel forward is not the spectacle in itself but those furtive glances stolen by social outcasts at hidden sites behind the public scaffolds. If Li assiduously guards against the orientalist gaze in her writing, she is much more interested in another kind of looking, a visual mode distinct from state- or group-orchestrated collective spectatorship via its singular, surreptitious, peripheral, and sometimes purely accidental nature. We might call it, to play on her title, vagrant witnessing.

Vagrant Witnesses

The novel opens with heralds of a denunciation ceremony. The target will be Gu Shan, a twenty-eight-year-old death row convict and an ex-Red Guard who herself had ruthlessly persecuted counterrevolutionaries, among them her parents, at public gatherings during the Cultural Revolution. Shan's present crime, however, has nothing to do with the defiance of filiality or morality. On the contrary, she has been branded an "unrepentant counterrevolutionary" for renouncing communism and becoming a "harsh critic of her generation's revolutionary zeal" (3), in other words, for repenting what she was under Mao. For this she has been sentenced, first to ten years in jail, and then, after she has served out this punishment, to death for the prison journals in which she poured out her critiques of the Party. Li's point with this premise is clear: the cycling of communist history, of which Shan's fate is only one tiny symptom, renders any pronouncement of national progress hollow.

Crucially, we never hear from Shan herself, at least not in an unmediated or free indirect discursive way that stands apart from other characters' eyes and ears. Like the spectacle of herself, Shan is solely appearance, spoken for but never speaking. At the same time, she is splintered across many lines of vision—a portrait of the political dissenter as modernist trope, an object imperfectly known through disparate perceiving subjects. Li, we might say, here presses a modernist technique into the service of fragmenting communist claims to harmony. And in the tradition of Joyce's *Dublin*, Faulkner's *Yoknapatawpha*, and most proximately, Ha Jin's *Dismount Fort*, *Muddy River* sets the scene for her ensemble social drama. Residents who know each other only scantily come to crisscross each others' lives continually via their mutual sightings of Shan's body. This is above all a story constructed through interlacing visual paths and obliquely overlapping horizons.

Tellingly, the denunciation ceremony is focalized through the perspective of Tong, a six-year-old boy newly arrived from the village who finds himself bullied by the townspeople and who hence aspires to become a model Communist Party member and self-martyring hero. Of Li's cast, Tong is the youngest, the most earnest, and the most predisposed to belief in propaganda; in this sense, he is an ideologue in the making, and

the closest counterpart to Shan in her youth. At the denunciation, these two generations of Party zealots converge belatedly:

Hushed talk rippled through the stadium when the counter-revolutionary was dragged onto the stage by two policemen dressed in well-ironed snow-white uniforms. Her arms were bound behind her back, and her weight was supported by the two men's hands, her feet barely touching the ground. For the first time since the beginning of the ceremony, the audience heaved a collective sigh. The woman's head drooped as if she were asleep. One of the two policemen pulled her head up by her hair, and Tong could see that her neck was wrapped in thick surgical tape, stained dark by blood. Her eyes, half-open, seemed to be looking at the children in the front rows without registering anything, and when the policeman let go of her hair, her head drooped again as if she were falling back into sleep.

The audience was called to its feet, and the shouting of slogans began. Tong shouted along with his classmates, but he felt cheated. The woman was not what he had expected: Her head was not shaved bald, as his parents had guessed it would be, nor did she look like the devil described to him by a classmate. From where he stood, he could see the top of her head, a bald patch in the middle, and her body, small in the prisoner's uniform that draped over her like a gray flour sack, did not make her look like a dangerous criminal.

The rendezvous between Shan and Tong is an occasion of non-recognition and disappointment, for neither truly sees the other. As an official spectacle devised by the state to provoke nationalist fervour and channel mass energy, the denunciation fails miserably even for the most willing citizen. The psychic dynamics of totalitarian spectatorship, Li implies, is not as straightforward or unified as some might think, nor are communist spectators as gullible and unthinking as the Olympic show would suggest. That the whole denunciation episode lasts only two paragraphs alerts us to its marginal importance in Li's larger nar-

rative. What matters for Li rests not in the outward demonstration of people's obedience but in their interior lives, before, after, and sometimes behind the spectacle.

If Tong's partly disobedient vision provides a glimpse into the brutality that has been wracked on Shan's body, Li confronts us with fuller revelations via two less respectable and dutiful characters who constitute the novel's unlikely romantic couple, Nini and Bashi. The former is a feature of Li's karmic realism. Born with a crippled left leg, the twelve-year-old Nini owes her deformity directly to Shan, who in her Red Guard days had kicked Nini's eight-months-pregnant mother in the belly. Growing up ignored by her parents as much as the townspeople, Nini often imagines herself, with an irony unbeknownst to her at first, to be the true daughter of the kind-hearted Teacher Gu and Mrs. Gu, Shan's parents. This daydream eventually backfires when the Gus emotionally abandon her during the time around Shan's execution. Still, Nini's existential invisibility grants her some advantages:

Knowledge of human beings came to Nini from eavesdropping on tales—her parents, in their best mood, walked around her as if she were a piece of furniture, and other people seemed to be able to ignore her existence. This meant Nini could learn things that other children were not allowed to hear.... The neighbors, after a day's work and before dinner, gathered in twos and threes in the alley and exchanged gossip, Nini's existence nearby never making them change topics hurriedly, as another child walking past would do. She heard stories of all kinds ... such tales bought Nini pleasures that other children obtained from toys or games with companions, and even though she knew enough to maintain a nonchalant expression, the momentary freedom and glee offered by eavesdropping were her closest experiences of a childhood that was unavailable to her, a loss of which she was not aware. (19–20)

At Shan's denunciation ceremony, Nini the perpetual eavesdropper turns into the novel's first vagrant witness. The night before, Nini's parents had ordered her to take her younger sisters to the denunciation so

that the whole family could partake in Shan's punishment. The next day, Nini arrives at the stadium, siblings in tow, but is denied entry by a security guard who mockingly tells her that she must belong to a proper work unit for attendance. Thus banned from the state-organized spectacle, she stumbles into a nearby alleyway and from behind a fence accidentally beholds the scene of Shan's post-denunciation "surgery." An ambulance pulls into the alley, and several lab-coated masked figures descend along with a few policemen:

Nini looked again. Someone was dragged into the alley. For a brief moment, Nini thought she saw the black hair of a woman, but before she could take another look, several men lifted the person onto the gurney, which was at once covered by a piece of white cloth. The body struggled under the sheet, but a few more hands pinned it down ... she saw a red spot on the white sheet covering the body, at first about the size of a plate, then spreading into an irregular shape.

A few minutes later, the body was lifted off the gurney, its legs kicking; yet strangely, no noise came from the struggling body. Nini felt an odd heaviness in her chest, as if she was caught in one of those nightmares where, no matter how hard you tried, you could not make a sound. The policemen shuffled the body inside the police car. The men and women in the white lab coats climbed back into the ambulance, and a moment later, both vehicles turned onto the main street and, with long and urgent siren wails, disappeared. (92)

This sinister spectacle, hidden away from the public eye, unfolds for the crippled girl alone. In this instant, Nini occupies the role of the symbolic vagrant, banished from the localized site of the nation-state's self-display and therefore well-placed to witness a forbidden scene just outside power's center stage. This witness, however, remains uncomprehending, for she fails to identify the surgical body as Shan's. As with Tong, the occasion is characterized by sight without recognition. The moment's meaning is deferred, and transferred, to the even more improbable hero of the novel, the nineteen-year-old pedophile Bashi.¹

Even more than Nini, Bashi is a social pariah in Muddy River. An orphan and a virgin, he stalks women and girls around town with fantasies of exploring their naked bodies, though never with any success, since he is universally shunned as a halfwit. With such anatomical intentions does he offer his assistance, as well as a sizable fee, to Kwen, an old bachelor who has been hired by Shan's father to collect and bury her corpse. In effect, Bashi replaces Nini as the novel's vagrant witness from this point on, seeing to completion the fate of Shan's body post-execution. At the burial site, he eagerly examines the cadaver but is shocked by what he sees: "The woman's body was lying facedown on the crystallized snow, her arms wrenched and bound behind her back in an intricate way.... When Kwen ripped the clothes off the body, they looked at the exposed middle part of the woman, the bloody and gaping flesh opening like a mouth with an eerie smile" (104–05). The worldly Kwen explains to Bashi that Shan's organs have been removed, most likely for a transplant, but also possibly as exercise for doctors who "need to practice so that their skills remain sharp" (106). After the two men part ways, Bashi returns to the corpse later in the evening, suspecting that Kwen has somehow defiled Shan's body. This time, he is presented with an even more nauseating sight: "He was not mistaken: The woman's breasts were cut off, and her upper body, with the initial wound from the transplant operation and the massive cuts Kwen had made, was a mess of exposed flesh, dark red and gray and white. The same mess extended down to between her legs" (123). Postmortem, Shan suffers even greater violations than in life, with the discredited town idiot as her only belated witness.

The novel's first section ends with a panorama into the remembered visions of those agents of the state, legal and medical, who had participated in the day's disciplinary procedures. A prison guard wakes up from a nightmare, recalling how she had helped to immobilize Shan while a doctor severed her vocal cords "so that she could not shout counterrevolutionary slogans at the last minute." An old orderly for the police station tosses in his bed as he is reminded of the "buckets of blood he had washed off the police jeep that had transferred the prisoner." A "horrible thing," he tells his wife, "to clean up so much blood. What did they do to her?" A surgeon who had operated on Shan is kept

awake not by residual terror but calculations of future rewards. “She had to die anyway,” he rationalizes, “so it didn’t matter, in the end, that they had changed the protocol because the patient did not believe in receiving something from a corpse and insisted that the prisoner be kept alive when the kidneys were removed.” Meanwhile, the “patient” and organ recipient is recovering in an army hospital miles away, surrounded by well-wishers. This operation, though not the most challenging the surgeon has performed, will be the one to make him the chair of his hospital’s surgery department and his wife its head nurse; it will also earn his twin daughters a recommendation from the local government for an elite high school in the provincial capital. But the collaborative agent of the state is not simply a self-interested pragmatist but also the prototypical family man and Confucian father, and his final thought, in typical patriarchal fashion, revolves around protecting his innocent wife and daughters from the knowledge of power’s moral costs: “The man thought about his wife and his daughters—they were fast asleep in their innocent dreams, unplagued by death and blood; the burden was on his shoulders, the man of the household, and he found it hard not to ponder the day when he could no longer shelter them, the two daughters especially, from the ugliness of a world that they were in love with now, rosebudlike girls that they were” (127–28). This world, Li intimates, lies behind the rosy spectacle of harmonious China broadcast in 2008 Beijing. And it is biopolitical through and through.

Biopolitical Cosmopolitanism

The issue of the PRC’s state-sanctioned program of organ harvesting, 90% of which reportedly depends on death row prisoners, has become an international hotbed of contention in recent years. An early diaspora critic of this practice is Harry Wu, a political prisoner for nineteen years in China before leaving for the U.S. in 1985. As Wu tirelessly argues in his writing and testimonies, the PRC organ trade represents the “ultimate human-rights violation” (156). Not only does it allow the communist regime to profit by systematically harvesting prisoners’ organs and selling them at premium prices to foreign buyers, but the profits incentivize the multiplication of capital offenses so that political dis-

sidents as well as undesirable social elements can be legitimately purged in ever greater numbers. The transplant program is at once a form of political tyranny and “a booming business” (149), as capitalist ends meet totalitarian means. For Wu, what compounds the horror of the situation is the complicity of medical personnel, as “police and doctors work closely together, supply and demand intertwining, as it were, with drastic results for prisoners who happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time with the right organ and the right blood type” (152). In some cases, the unwilling donors have been known to be alive during the operation.

This is the story of Gu Shan. Yiyun Li surely has Wu's well-known campaign in mind when she advances this viciously dark portrait of the PRC and the underside of its national progress in *The Vagrants*. Such a portrait evokes Michel Foucault's theory of biopower as much as Giorgio Agamben's of biopolitics, on which modern sovereignty manifests itself not through threats of death but mechanisms of control over the biological life of subjects. As Foucault argues in his by now familiar formulation, if sovereign power has traditionally been defined by the “right to decide life and death,” and if the sovereign of the ancient world “exercised his right of life only by exercising his right to kill, or by refraining from killing ... [s]ince the classical age the West has undergone a very profound transformation of these mechanisms of power.” For the modern sovereign, the weight of rightful decision has shifted from death to life, from the power to kill to the power to preserve, and not only to preserve but to “administer, optimize, and multiply [life], subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations” (135–37). For Foucault, a society's “threshold of modernity” is indexed exactly by its entry into a state of biopower:

For the first time in history, no doubt, biological existence was reflected in political existence; the fact of living was no longer an inaccessible substrate that only emerged from time to time, amid the randomness of death and its fatality; part of it passed into knowledge's field of control and power's sphere of intervention. Power would no longer be dealing simply with legal

subjects over whom the ultimate dominion was death, but with living beings, and the mastery it would be able to exercise over them would have to be applied at the level of life itself; it was taking charge of life, more than the threat of death, that gave power its access even to the body. If one can apply the term *bio-history* to the pressures through which the movements of life and the processes of history interfere with one another, one would have to speak of *bio-power* to designate what brought life and its mechanisms into the realm of explicit calculations and made knowledge-power an agent of transformation of human life.... For millennia, man remained what he was for Aristotle: a living animal with the additional capacity for a political existence; modern man is an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being in question. (142–43)

Li's *The Vagrants* and its representation of communist state power—enacted long-distance directly onto the body of one provincial criminal—resonates forcefully with Foucault's paradigm of modern sovereign biopower. From a biopolitical perspective, the significance of Gu Shan's fate lies in not the fact of her death or the party-state's capacity to execute her but the ways in which her life is sustained, prolonged, and finally harvested so that the life of another could be extended, renewed. The very technologies of her punishment become deployed in the interests of biological life's maintenance. This applies to the individual as much as the nation, for the state's implementation of biopower on the micro level *vis-à-vis* Shan and her beneficiary converges perfectly with its macro control of the life and health of an entire population. With terrifying precision, then, does Li depict the communist regime's regulation and redistribution of its subjects' biological life as the epitome of modern sovereign biopower. The flash point of this system is the organ trade, its starkest emblem the death row prisoner's body.

Whereas the governmental use of Shan's biological life exemplifies Foucault's model of biopower, the threshold status of her body, suspended between life and death for much of the novel's first section, further invokes Agamben's notion of *homo sacer*, a being "situated at

the intersection of a capacity to be killed and yet not sacrificed, outside both human and divine law" (73). For Agamben, *homo sacer* designates a figure whose life is supremely exposed, for he is at once excluded from the protective jurisdiction of secular law and exempt from the sanctifying taboo of religious law, and hence can be killed by anyone with complete impunity without committing either murder or sacrilege. As a death row prisoner, Shan embodies *homo sacer* par excellence. Since her life is already condemned to execution and belongs imminently to the state, the repeated carving up of her still-living body are regarded as unpunishable, a mere procedural overture to that which has been decreed. Even in death, her corpse is made to perform one of the corporal functions most associated with life, namely, sex—in actuality by Kwen, in imagination by Bashi. Moreover, the medical treatment of her body as one already available for the organ operation recalls Agamben's discussion of a haunting category of *homo sacer*—the "neomorts," those "bodies ... which would have the legal status of corpses but would maintain some of the characteristics of life for the sake of possible future transplants" (164). Just as the development of life-support and transplant technologies endowed modern scientists and surgeons with the authority to specify the technical boundaries between life and death, so is this sovereign biopower now conferred on the medical team entrusted with Shan's body. For Li, the party-state displays its totalitarian power most clearly in these moments when it delimits the biopolitical border between life and death. Agamben elaborates on this biopolitical capacity as the very heart of modern politics: "the decisive fact is that, together with the process by which the exception everywhere becomes the rule, the realm of bare life—which is originally situated at the margins of political order—gradually begins to coincide with the political realm, and exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside, *bios* and *zoē*, right and fact, enter into a zone of irreducible indistinction." Agamben calls this zone of indistinction "the state of exception" (9). He may be said to carry Foucault's thesis to its extreme conclusion by positing the capture of biological life as not merely one mode of state power but the essence of politics as such; that is, for him, modern sovereign power is at its core biopower. Along Agamben's model, then, Shan may be said to embody

the consummate *homo sacer* of communist biopower, her life the absolute instantiation of bare life.

If Foucault cautiously confines his analysis to the West, Agamben is at times much bolder in stretching the scope of his theory to encompass the whole world, proposing it as “the new biopolitical *nomos* of the planet” (176). This impulse to globalize or cosmopolitanize biopower, however, elides the political distinction between democracy and totalitarianism—and this distinction, I would maintain, matters crucially. The PRC’s one-party state, after all, is far from representing every world government either in structure or in practice. As many activists including Harry Wu have argued, and as Li herself would likely agree, the communist regime’s record of human rights violations goes hand in hand with its lack of democratic institutions. At its most problematic, Agamben’s poststructuralist articulation of the “zone of irreducible indistinction” evinces a certain unexamined dependence on totalitarianism as at once the archetypal form of state power and the inevitable departure point of theory, all the while erasing the political context of its own utterance, the very political conditions that make it possible there and not elsewhere.

At the same time, in terms of the PRC’s organ trade, the additional factor of global capital renders uneasy any attempt to exoticize this cannibalistic biopower as a strictly “oriental” one—or to dismiss the critique of it as purely orientalist. As one scholar notes, the economy of human organs is global in scope, and “[i]n general, the flow of organs follows the modern routes of capital: from South to North, from Third to First World, from poor to rich, from black and brown to white, and from female to male” (Scheper-Hughes 193). China won its bid for the 2008 Olympics at a time when state executions were far from abating. Although international pressure and the possibility of an Olympic boycott likely contributed to the passing of a regulation by the communist government in late 2007 restricting organ transplants from executed prisoners to family members, whether this law is actually enforced remains to be seen (Kamm 232). What does crystallize as a bleak theme around the Beijing Olympics is that biological life has now become a political bargaining chip between China and the world. In this global

transaction between biopower and capital, the Olympics is traded for human rights, athletes for prisoners, sports for executions.

Attention to biopower can usefully ground theoretical models of cosmopolitanism through an analysis of our common species life, the myriad ways in which, in human beings' most precarious circumstances, every body regardless of race and nation can get caught up in the life-controlling machinery of a state. Still, any effort to theorize a biopolitical cosmopolitanism must also heed the political conditions of its own utterance as well as the real differences of biopolitical governance across the earth. The spread of global capital complicates but does not eradicate these differences. Indeed, as we have seen in the case of the PRC, capitalism can readily accommodate itself to a totalitarian state's ever more intensified modes of exploitation of domestic subjects' bodies, even as those from democratic countries come to reap benefits from this global network of exchange with ever cleaner lines of vision. In our millennium, as the U.S. and China face off as the world's two most powerful polities and economies, transnational biopower may well emerge as the basis of a new analysis of globalization, intersecting with imperialism and capitalism to reconfigure our understanding of this encounter. Li is one of the Chinese diaspora writers today who will direct our gaze to this confrontation.

Guy Debord, in his seminal writing on the spectacle, proposed pessimistically in 1967 that the rise of the spectacle entails the "proletarianization of the world": as the culmination of an economic system of alienated production, the spectacle, he contends, has turned every human being into a unit of separation, in a world where no "real activity" is left except that which is "forcibly channeled into the global construction of the spectacle" (21–22). In such a world, agency and autonomy lose their meaning, for "the individual's own gestures are no longer his own, but rather those of someone else who represents them to him." Likewise, notions of home, of ownership and origins, become empty, since the "spectator feels at home nowhere, for the spectacle is everywhere" (23). In this connection, the title of Yiyun Li's novel resonantly conjures a similar image of the exilic spectator, and her textual ending of a resumption of homeless wandering hints at internal vagrancy's spreading within

the communist nation. Nevertheless, Li is not without hope. Unlike Debord, her spectacle is not “immune from human activity” or “inaccessible to any projected review or correction” (17). Even if no forum for an equal dialogue with state power is forthcoming soon on her narrative horizon, the moments of vagrant witnessing hold out the possibility of a future where failure is not inevitable.

Note

1 In interview, Li comments: “Sweet, terrible Bashi. You know, I never thought of him as a pedophile until I was almost through with the book, and one of my readers mentioned it. I was horrified!” At the same time, Li notes that the concept of the hero is a highly freighted one for her, since she grew up with stories of martyrs who became heroes only by sacrificing themselves and sometimes their children for the revolution: “You see, you don’t question heroism until you are older. So for me, this novel is a way of questioning heroism” (“Chinese Gothic”).

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