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Tang Shui'en

The Alternative Education of a Chinese Punk

2009

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Translation of an autobiographical essay by Tang Shui'en, mainland left-libertarian musician and activist, recounting his path from childhood in 1980s rural Hubei to participation in Wuhan's pioneering punk scene since the late 1990s, interaction with overseas radicals, and experimentation with independent media and an "autonomous youth center." Written in early 2009 for a forum on social space among the generation born in the 1980s, organized by the Shao Foundation.

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Among the common masses, how many of us are aware of the oppressive forces that push us to society's margins? Apart from a small minority, most people – even if at every moment they feel discomfort – are unable to determine the source of this pain. The word “marginal” itself is so abstract that it can only serve as a code of recondite academia and mass media. As the radical Brazilian educator Paulo Freire has shown, the masses are the “object” of development. We do not exist within the active process of naming things, but only within the theories of education and behavior created by our oppressors, which have fostered a “culture of silence” among the people. In addition to silence, this process has cultivated us to be a “mass” with minds focused on the mainstream while our bodies are marginalized, and it has created a market to profit from this situation. Clearly, the vitality of today's consumerism is related to “materialism” – a word the Party has helped redefine from its philosophical sense [XXXX] to mean commercial materialism [XXXX]. Meanwhile, social movement activists and mobilizers are attempting to rouse the masses' sense of social participa-

tion. The obstacles we face stem not only from the combination of a “culture of consumption” with a “culture of silence,” but also from the violent and totalitarian shadow left behind by history, the Left, and “utopianism.” That shadow is even more threatening to that elite consumerism which tries to play the role of world-savior, promising to help individuals realize their material desires. This is probably why the tradition of patriarchal education has only served to reinforce the warning, “Do not discuss politics!” [XXXX]. ((This phrase was popularized by Lao She’s play *Teahouse*.) This point may be helpful in analyzing the current impasse of activism. Some “postmodern activists” have calmed down since the ferment of Seattle and Genoa. They’ve begun to reread Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and are trying to set in motion a more fundamental movement – that of radical education. But what does the self-education of the oppressed entail? This article doesn’t attempt to sort out the various theories of radical education. Instead, I would like to briefly introduce my own story. As a “punk,” I experienced a kind of alternative education that could never develop within a classroom. And it is this enlightening (and irrational) education that became an average person’s impetus to action. Although this story is perhaps unique, it may provide a reference for those who have undergone similar transformations. What I should first say is that, only after attending college did I venture into the city – which had never aroused any feelings in me before. Only in college did I come across punk music, the internet, and the library (although, in the Chinese world, these channels still tend to shut out alternative perspectives). Before this I had spent my life in a village in the hills, intoxicated with nature. I had a “peasant’s mentality” of self-deprecation. Once I witnessed bell-bottoms being fiercely cut by red-arm-banded zealots. I would listen to Cui Jian’s “Nothing to My Name” [XXXX] and be filled with a profound longing for a better future.

For activists, our greatest dilemma at present is akin to what the leftist scholar Hannah Arendt meant when she said that acting is

more difficult than thinking [XXXX]. She came to this conclusion once authoritarianism [XXXX] had already spread throughout every inch of the power structure. As a rational intellectual, Arendt advocated “civil resistance,” but also worried that utopian resistance would degenerate into an abyss of violence and lead to another form of totalitarianism. Is there a third path through which to change the world? John Holloway, professor of sociology at the Autonomous University of Puebla in Mexico, argues, in his 2002 book *Change the World without Taking Power*, that we must rethink and resist the idea of revolution as a seizure of political power rather than an opposition to power itself. Experience with traditional methods of reform and revolution have shown that a reliance on power and government leads only to new programs of idolatry, and to the recasting of social relations into new rigid forms. New movements of social resistance should not walk down old paths. Instead, we should focus on trying to establish open, responsible communities and social relations.

Holloway lives in Mexico. He has been on close terms with the Zapatista movement in the jungles of southeastern Mexico. In order to resist the “terroristic” encroachment of neoliberalism, the indigenous Maya of Chiapas, with their “spokesperson” Subcomandante Marcos, embarked on a poetic “postmodern revolution”; a “guerilla war of symbolism” and “of cyberspace” (*The Masked Knight* [XXXX], edited by Dai Jinhua and Lau Kin Chi), whose supporters can be found throughout the world. The Zapatistas’ new form of revolution has inspired a whole generation of social resistance movements, including the recent mobilization against the G8. As for the dangers of ossification and idolatry, I think a reminder is in order, not only to Marcos, but even more so to his numerous followers and supporters. I couldn’t help laughing when I learned that Marcos has already been called “Che Guevara the Second”!

Although I had heard of the Zapatistas before, my first encounter with their supporters was in 2004, when my band and I toured

Europe. 40 days, 35 locations – nearly all of which were abandoned buildings and fields squatted by anarchist punks. Books and pamphlets about the Zapatistas, along with “anti-G8,” “no borders,” “feminist” and “anti-racist” movements, were neatly displayed in the various infoshops for people to read or purchase. In addition, through concert fundraisers and by adhering to the principles of “fair trade,” these infoshops were purchasing coffee beans directly from the indigenous peoples of Chiapas, thereby making sure the money went to the farmers instead of middlemen. It seemed to us that these Zapatista-supporters in the squat scene were not just playing around.

From Birmingham to Barcelona and from Copenhagen to Prague, squats seemed to be beacons of social warning [XXXX] and calls to action for anarchist punks. They were nestled throughout the large cities and small villages of the European continent, becoming important centers of social resistance. Squatting is an old tradition in Europe, especially England (it’s said that 54% of English residents are the progeny of squatters, who believed the commoditization of land to be a crime against the laws of nature.) People occupying unused buildings owned by the rich is in itself a kind of resistance intimately connected to land rights. Today squatting is different, however. It is no longer condoned by flexible laws that leave room for dispute. Now the law uses all its strength to protect private property, to the point that even previously public property has been privatized. So, because of their squatting activities, anarchists naturally become a thorn in the side of the police and property owners. Often facing the threat of eviction, all sorts of protests and confrontations occur regularly. Xinhua news agency once published a series of illustrated reports about such a confrontation in Germany. The words chosen for the title were simple, and rather humorous: “Police Suppress Rioting Youth.” Another darkly humorous incident occurred in Vienna, when a group of anarchists stormed a building that was being put up for sale by the Austrian Communist Party. The anarchists took in and pro-

must move from the innocent experience of memorizing books to that of reality. We must get in touch with the natural language of the earth, and understand the forces and pitfalls of power behind our activism. Only in this way might direct democracy and consensus decision-making become pertinent. Only in this way might the ideas of Asian media activists on issues such as the internet, anti-globalization, anarchism, activism, and land rights become meaningful. Only in this way might alternative cooperative projects (such as cooperative publishing and community participation) come to fruition.

In a recent workshop, a young man who had spent his life listening to rock music and had never asked questions about world affairs came by. He was just like I was originally—things felt wrong, but he wasn’t sure why. We played the documentary *Good Luck, Comrades!* (XXXXXXXXXX) and then began our discussion. The guy seemed a little embarrassed, and a little upset—just like I was in the beginning. Suddenly he asked, “but why should we be opposed to globalization?” ...Why?

and its social significance. We also plan to invite *bus musicians* to come and perform. These musicians are usually from the countryside. They come to the cities, where they squeeze onto crowded buses and play pop music, earning a small income from the donations of passengers. Because there is a degree of coercion to it, such performances—which are viewed as a form of begging—are usually despised and seen as contributing to the destruction of the urban social order. We have invited a woman to perform and talk with the audience about her life in the countryside and the city. This way the audience, we hope, will understand the social origins of this kind of performance and no longer view it as an act of greed by lazy people.

The village where “Our Home” is located had been plagued by a garbage problem for four years, and no one had done anything about it. So we decided to organize a “garbage concert.” This helped us raise money to build a garbage pit and clean up the trash. This was not the chivalrous behavior of a Zoro, but an attempt to bring people’s attention to the worsening garbage problem, the increasing paralysis of local government under the rule of the Party, and our own social responsibility as citizens. At the same time, this helped us merge with “the village as a community” (previously the villagers having viewed us warily as strange and dangerous outsiders – students, bohemian types, even thieves stealing their firewood).

This redefinition of terms, or this transformation of strategy, was the first step in our attempt at activism, an unavoidable step. Whether it is for ourselves or for those who are interested but uncertain, this redefinition is a foundation for developing a common understanding. The promotion of a common understanding cannot rely on direct action alone to “mobilize” the masses. Of equal importance is the transformation of old terms, old habits, and old meanings. This seems to have already become a consensus in the global justice movement. Thus, Freire’s “radical education,” such as the subversion of corporate logos such as Nike and the creation of new meanings, has been understood as a new strategy. We, too,

tected “illegal” immigrants who had been displaced or were considered unwelcome by the government. I personally witnessed how anarchists went about building fortifications to hide and protect these foreigners, safe-guarding them from police raids.

To me, this whole scene was truly novel and exciting: confident that such action is just [XXXX], to squat wasted real estate and turn it into strongholds for planning and participating in social movements, supporting other disadvantaged people [XX] (punks themselves being a marginalized group), combining discussion, reflection and action, and creating open and egalitarian interpersonal relationships. Ever since the British pacifist-anarchist band Crass, with its DIY ethos, got involved in serious issues of music and society (like the anti-war, anti-nuclear, and anti-authoritarian movements), there opened up a new scene quite different from the romp [XX] of the Sex Pistols’ “culture shock.” This new autonomous scene blossomed throughout Europe and, later, Southeast Asia. Despite constant debates over issues such as the use of violent or non-violent tactics and ideological disputes between sects, generally speaking, pacifist activism has been vigorously pushing forward a deep bond between musical resistance and social resistance.

For someone like me, coming from an environment where DIY culture has been stripped of its original aesthetic/social meaning and turned into a marketing ploy by the likes of IKEA, this new punk-DIY culture opened a real window of understanding. I know now that punk is not merely noise, that it is interwoven with a profound alternative sociology and philosophy. The moment this window opened, all sorts of ideas relating to activism and social resistance came rushing forth, such as anti-authoritarianism, direct democracy, direct action, anti-consumerism, anti-neoliberal economic globalization, anti-eviction struggles, and “participatory media” [XXXXX]. The regions of Europe, South America, and Southeast Asia conjoin culturally in Hong Kong and Taiwan – separated from China only by a strip of water. I began to understand the history of social movements in these places. More importantly, I began

to regain the individuality [XXXX] I had nearly lost to the clutches of patriarchy and social hierarchy. My friends and I started to believe that, by changing (or “revolutionizing”) our everyday lives, we could change the world, or at least change ourselves through study, going from modern slaves to social actors with a sense of dignity.

We began by letting our imaginations run wild in the pages of DIY zines. Like the boundless affection I felt for punk music when I first encountered it, I developed a similar enthusiasm for all kinds of activism related to social resistance. I sought out and began to translate whatever materials I could get my hands on, about “new ideas” such as “direct democracy” and “autonomy,” and through comparison, I began to clarify my own positions. Eventually, the social propositions of pacifist-anarchists, and the concept of “I” promoted by certain media activists, left the biggest impression on me. Inspired, I decided to explore the possibilities of peaceful acts of resistance. In China, the present system does everything in its power to prevent us from exploring even those fads that have already grown way out of proportion, and from effectively expressing ourselves in those public places that uniformed powers tightly control – like avenues and parks. We must find a place within our own lives, a space to serve as meeting ground and intermediary, to circulate information, to discuss the “symbols” of action we have encountered, to share the connectedness of our plights, to interpret it, and to attempt to act to the best of our ability. Certainly such a place could not be a state-run “youth palace” [XXXX] – those are places that put on a show of peace and prosperity [XXXX], teaching the young to passively accept the status quo. Nor could it be a bar or a coffee shop either, whose consumerist atmosphere makes us uneasy. A squat would be even less realistic: the moment buildings are occupied in China, both the money-grubbing landlords (materialism having already destroyed social trust, and landlords having no sense of security regarding their property) and the autocratic police (there’s no way to ensure you won’t become another victim

carious workers. Then they substituted the 12 signs of the zodiac with the subsistence problems and forms of resistance of precarious workers. They made statues and cards and handed them out in supermarkets. This successfully attracted a number of people who had previously remained unpoliticized. It enabled such people to be exposed to a realistic analysis of labor conditions in Italy. Later, they invented another character—the half-British, half-Japanese fashion designer “Serpica Naro” (a rearrangement of the letters of “San Precario”), who uses symbols of resistance as elements of design, and who managed to become a participant in the 2005 “Milan Fashion Week.” At the same time, they launched a protest against Naro as a way of criticizing the exploitation of underprivileged groups by fashion designers. Without a doubt, this type of incident is the stuff mainstream media adores. The mainstream media from Italy and other European countries, as well as Canada and Japan, all began to report on this “theatrical event.” In the process, the problems of precarious worker groups that the mainstream media had ignored were spread out on the table for more people to see. This groundbreaking cultural activism (or, as the Italian media activists dubbed it, this “strategy of popularizing the precarious worker as a brand name”), the ingenious use of mainstream media publicity aside, can avert the animosity and barriers that exist between the politicized and the unpoliticized. It can also highlight social problems through everyday forms of struggle.

We, too, are trying to carry out this kind of action. Although the problems we face are not the same, we are nevertheless trying to use cultural activism to communicate ideas and overcome stereotyped opinions. For example, getting rid of the tacky electronic character of our stage and setting it up in the yard, under the shade, near the vegetable garden. Aside from becoming closer to the earth, such an act proves that not all art requires the investment of commercial capital; that we can organize our own activities as a community. Before a concert, we try to organize a discussion. Usually, independent musicians and the audience talk about music

have it be accepted? Experience suggests that radical independent media attracts people's attention only during big events (such as the anti-G8 summits in Seattle and Genoa). But such events that attract the world's attention don't occur every day. Is it possible to create our own events, and, with the help of indymedia, to make them a part of people's everyday agenda?

At our second gathering, a media activist from Genoa named Simone chaired a workshop called "Don't Hate the Media, Become the Media." He left us with some inspiring things to reflect upon, and an experience from which to draw lessons. What's worth mentioning is that this workshop was divided into two parts and held in separate places. The first part was held in a university, the second in "Our Home." At a time when the corporate media is fighting "vulgarity," getting such a "natural enemy of the state" as "indymedia" into a university lecture hall is quite difficult, but not impossible. Although the professor seemed a little worried, we were able to use the label of "left-wing media" as a disguise, bringing the ideas of independent media before students who knew nothing about the subject. It would seem that students, through their own efforts, carry out a degree of autonomous education in the university, so to guide them toward a more cognitive direction is not impossible. As for the workshop itself, Simone's experience with indymedia in Italy was not successful. This may have been due to the combined influences of Italy's history of violent anarchism and the death of Carlo Giuliani in Genoa. Italian indymedia was not only suppressed by the government, it was feared by ordinary citizens and gradually became reduced to a small circle of self-referential radicals. This left them with no choice but to change their strategy. They began using mass symbols to which people were more accustomed, in order to give indymedia a new orientation, and to endow it with (or perhaps we should say, to wrestle back from the mainstream media) a new image and meaning. In a country with such a deep-seated religious atmosphere as Italy, they first had to invent a character by the name of St. Precario to serve as the guardian of pre-

of a "hide-and-seek" game [i.e. police brutality]) get angry, and the consequences could be serious. But where there's a will there's a way [XXXXXXXX], a loophole in which the authorities would show no interest. We decided to rent a house. If you want complete control over a place, the only choice is to rent. Fortunately, we were able to find a secluded house outside the city that had been basically abandoned. The rent was next to nothing.

Although the house was a bit old, the surrounding scenery had a natural beauty we found invigorating. After cleaning out the dust and pulling the weeds, we decided on the various functions the house would serve. First, the house was to be an infoshop – a place to supply all the various alternative writings and information on social movements we could gather. Second, a conference center – from that day forth all workshops, debates, and film screenings would be held at the house. Third, a stage, set up in the courtyard – to provide a space for rock, experimental, and wandering street musicians to perform. Fourth, a guest house – to provide free accommodation for those in need, and an outdoor fire pit, for friends to relax by. Finally, on a pillar of the outer wall, we mounted a red and black five-pointed star, and gave the house a name: "Our Home' Autonomous Youth Center" ["XXX"XXXXXXXX].

So long as you put forth the effort, physical space will arrive rather easily, and transformation will proceed smoothly. What we didn't expect was that the moment we hung up the sign with the word "autonomous," everyday social relations would have to be re-defined. From that moment onward, the destructive and constructive sides of change began to collide with each other. New relations have no blueprint. We already had no choice but to change our disorderly pace of action and become more serious. We discussed the question of relative freedom vs. absolute freedom, whether it was necessary, in this mixed house of activists and hippies, to have written rules, whether to rely completely on individual initiative when working together or to assign specific tasks, whether or not to have "restrictions," whether or not and how to adopt consensus

decision-making, and so on. But the peculiar name “autonomous” caused controversy within a matter of seconds – to the point that it was almost abandoned from the start. Since names associated with “collectivism” have plagued our history with bad memories, it is easy to cause misunderstandings, which can be quite destructive. It was then that I realized that those undercurrents of internal contradictions, which I had regarded as a mere curiosity in European squats and social movements, were now appearing in our own backyard, and they were even more severe in our case. We have our own history, you see. In particular, that one catastrophic utopian rhapsody [XXX]. In any event, the moment we entered into an autonomous “procedure” [XX], the meaning of our actions, our collective form, and various other social relations contained in our newly unfettered imaginations, all had to go through serious introspection and redesign. Otherwise we would continue to be stuck in the memories of past enslavement, with no way forward.

First, the word “autonomy” has political implications. The German journalist and professor of literature Victor Klemperer, as early as the Third Reich, understood the political implications of language. He wrote diary entries which analyzed how language had been manipulated and dehumanized by the National Socialist Party, who had turned language into “an authoritarian code in the subconscious communication of victims, criminals, and spectators.” But whether it is the Third Reich or a modern empire in the name of “democracy” or “republic,” this kind of political technique has always proven useful. Our parent’s generation endured such hardship. The “violent storm” that was the Cultural Revolution tragically redefined everything related to power and politics (this, of course, including terms associated with critical thinking as well). As for our generation, manufactured consent and thought-control have not only continued unabated; they have become even more severe through the use of material incentives and public-relations techniques. Regardless of whether communication is being carried out within our collective or with outsiders, we have no choice

ing forth the forces of action. But from the perspective of those less resolute, at the very least these people can receive a kind of understanding they could not anywhere else. The sad part is that many people my age have been duped by a mass media which pretends to be omniscient. They think they know everything. One of the effects of the mainstream media’s rather scary reportage is that people feel satisfied at the level of “knowledge.” This is also one of the reasons why “mobilization” efforts are often ineffective. While we complain about public indifference toward political participation, Paulo Freire’s attempts at radical education in South America (it is the opinion of some that China should learn from the experiences of South America) remind us that “education”—the most basic social bond—has largely been ignored by activists. This not only causes us to get caught up in the traps of isolation, but also guarantees that the results of action will sink into a state of passivity. So there is a pressing need to focus our attention and efforts on education—whether that be an education of self-reflection, or one of dialogue with others. It follows that workshops are extremely helpful in the redefinition of terms, as well as in engaging in self-introspection. Workshops are themselves a process of reconstructing meaning through self-reflection.

For instance, it’s hard for people to avoid associating the word “radical” with “violence.” Even if you clearly profess pacifist principles, if you pose new concepts and call on the people to change their own state of affairs, the word “radical” is easily equated with “coercion” and “oppression.” Even if it is mere discussion, the word “radical” seems to evoke the language and thoughts of violence. Those involved in indymedia are often seen as “radicals.” People’s understanding of independent media has never been able to escape the horrific shadow of the historically violent Left. Its whole ethos of *fraternity* [XX] (perhaps trust in one another has already completely vanished, so not only do people not believe in each other, but the “tragedy” that is *love* is simply laughed at) is hard for most to relate to. How can we get indymedia to attract more people and

confrontation, such an experience is actually one of the most typical forms of “radical education.” As Paulo Freire wrote, “the more radical one is, the more he will engage reality, the more he will understand reality, and the better equipped he will be to change it. He will no longer be afraid to face, listen to, and observe the world around him.” At the very least, we now have a better understanding of our shortcomings and have been given the opportunity to improve.

What is of interest is that those who participated in the discussion on sexual freedom were all male, while the participants in the discussion on Serpica Naro and the Milan Fashion Week—with the exception of one guy who came with his friend—were all female. Perhaps this is merely a coincidence. Or perhaps there is no need to intentionally use gender in drawing distinctions. Either way, we were left with a feeling that we need to create more appealing activities and encourage women to use their own ways of participating in “hard political” activism. But this is getting a bit off subject. We can return to this later.

In regard to workshops, people are either afraid they will result in political disaster or criticize them for being too disorderly (words left by a reader at the bottom of a flyer for one of our activities). Others pessimistically suspect workshops dealing with indymedia, social media, globalization, feminism, migrant workers and other such topics may cause a bit of commotion, but will never bring about any real change. For those who would like to quickly plan a blueprint for the future, discussion forums (originally we were holding “lectures,” then after a brief debate we changed to a form that seemed more egalitarian – “discussion”) appear as merely a chessboard for games of language. Such people ignore the forces of activism that can be evoked through human cognition. Whenever we touch upon the meaning of so-called radicalism, certain problems arise. These problems are no longer relegated to history, but instead become a reference for our current reality. From the perspective of an activist, such problems go one step further in draw-

but to work on redefining terms we will inevitably have to use – such as the word “politics.” **Politics is not state administration by parties or special interest groups, it is our participation as subjects in the construction of social relations.** The most unfamiliar term in need of redefinition is “autonomy.” Autonomy does not mean “secession” from the whole, but an escape from external authoritarian control. At both the individual and collective levels, autonomy is the realization and upholding of self-governance. Perhaps the most common term in need of redefinition is “DIY.” DIY is not only about economic mutual aid and cooperation, and resistance to the inhuman aesthetics of industry; it is also a mode of organization for grassroots social action. Other terms in need of redefinition include “anarchy,” “utopia,” “freedom,” “democracy,” “public,” “society,” “citizen,” “consensus decision-making,” “hierarchy,” “revolution,” “mutual aid,” “education” and “consumption.” At almost every level there are terms that must be redefined toward the restoration of our dignity as subjects. This task is not just the duty of intellectuals, but also an obligation for everyone to carry out in our daily lives.

Of course this is an enormous and lengthy project that could not succeed right away. Even if the meaning of such terms – while possessing a degree of loose, common understanding – was repeatedly explained and communicated, still the political terrors of the past have successfully prevented people from attempting to live as anarchists. The subjective “call” to activism is usually ignored, and those who take interest in such things are equated with the coercive “mobilization” of the past. And in a little autonomous room, the most vocal are suspected by the silent of harboring plans to force some kind of ideology upon them.

An “observer” (most people prefer to be observers and not participants – at least in the beginning) once noted that nihilistic hippies and militant activists make for a bad partnership. At first glance such a statement seems reasonable. There is an ancient proverb that says, “those with different principles cannot make common

cause” [XXXXXXXX]. After more reflection, however, are we not all seeking a purer kind of freedom? If those whose goals are so similar cannot find common ground, then how will those with more diverse goals ever cooperate? If even a small collective cannot tolerate dissent, how can we hope that a society of 1.5 billion can truly respect cultural diversity? Another observer once noted that, while the goals of activism may be positive, one’s style of writing should not be too austere. This too has truth to it, but the models this observer held up as examples were merely the most popular foul-mouthed bloggers at the time. It’s not that I despise crude language, I just think it’s a pity that “serious” expression makes people so uncomfortable. Why do we take self-conscious reflection to be a burden? Extending this further, perhaps this is not simply a question of language, but something that should be traced back to the idea of “utopia.” Recently I’ve been looking through the thick pile of yellow-tinged *Red Flag* newspaper clippings that our landlord left behind. Inside are words such as “friendship, camaraderie, solidarity, struggle,” and other utopian phrases – the sense of design and drama is superb. As soon as the idea of communist utopia was discovered in China, it became a disguise for totalitarianism. Who would not completely detest it? To throw the baby out with the bath water could not be a more normal human reaction. So it appears this may require some time, using action itself to explain.

But political opinions and the meaning of language are not the only obstructions to the third path. Other hidden dimensions of society – closely woven and tautly stretched – may thrust up a sword of greater or lesser brightness in order to injure those anarchists who are accused of wanting to “play God.” One such example is our mechanisms of social reproduction. Wanting to get rid of corrupt power relations by adhering to a logic that has already been institutionalized is like “the royalists” [XXX] (dramas glorifying emperors and heroes being fashionable these days) trying their hardest to resist change, incessantly scheming to re-throne the emperor, messing up, and sending themselves to a guillotine of their

own creation. Take for example the ideas – whether apparent or not – of male chauvinism, patriarchy [XXX], and hierarchy. These ideas creep up on us, causing those who strive for innovation to fall under false charges the moment they drop their guard – even though such innovators are more sensitive to authoritarian control and try to eliminate it. These mechanisms are like an assembly line for making bombs. It produces and accumulates a constant stream of bombs, until one goes off, then everything’s covered in a thick cloud of smoke. No matter whether you’re inside or outside of the cloud, you’ll be thrown into an awkward situation where you can’t see anything. This isn’t one of those demolition scenes from the movies where the smoke dissipates. No, this will congeal into a permanent trauma. But for those who “want to play God,” such a situation isn’t inevitable. It can be avoided, not by seeking out a non-existent god to re-create the system, but by learning how to learn through listening, and how to change through learning.

Once during a workshop on “sexual freedom,” a “queer” comrade threw us supposedly “free” anarchists for a bit of a loop. Several of us felt that many lesbians in China were treating homosexuality as a subcultural fad, and they were being flamboyant about it. We assumed this to be a consequence of the muddled state of personal values in China. Hearing this, the workshop’s moderator immediately retorted, “Who are you to doubt and criticize the sexual orientation of others? Even if they are pretending, it is within their freedom do so. First of all, they have not interfered with your life in any way. And second, they most certainly have their own reasons for behaving in such a way. Maybe they are undecided about their identity.” The moderator continued, “Flamboyant? Imagine if we didn’t display our inclinations, how could we find a partner?” Surprised and ashamed, I felt as if I were being mocked by myself. While claiming to be disciples of “active freedom,” we could not even accept the passive freedom of others. What was the difference between ourselves and those guys in bars who slander people for being gay? But if we look to the positive side of this face-to-face