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# **Running and Reading Remnant *Danwei* Walls in China's Post-Socialist City**

**Gerda Wielander**

## **Abstract**

Built on visual and running/walking ethnography this article analyzes visual traces left on remnant *danwei* walls in post-socialist China. The article considers *danwei* walls as *yiji* (remnant traces) that serve as loci of political memory and as medium to host other visual traces by a variety of different actors. Drawing on a range of concepts from cultural studies and visual ethnography, the article provides a close reading of these traces treating them as important historical documents and examples of how human actors interact with the built environment during China's post-socialist transformation. The article is built around three case studies each of which captures different stages of the physical decay of the *danwei* as represented in the materiality of the walls in varying states of (dis)repair and the different nature of the visual traces local actors have left on them. The analysis of traces—understood as signs on the walls as well as the walls themselves—reveals a story of the ways in which humans interact with a very specific part of China's built environment at a moment of transition and of how relationships between these human actors change in the process. The article provides a reading of visual social phenomena, contributing to the understanding of signifying practices in post-socialist urban China.

## **Keywords**

China; *danwei* walls; visual ethnography; walking ethnography; post-socialist city; urban history

## ***Introduction***

Until the 1980s, Chinese city lanes and avenues were flanked by walls enclosing *danwei* 单位 (work units) and their residential compounds. Dominating the socialist urban planning from the 1950s to the 1980s, *danwei* were enclosed compounds reflecting the requirement of cities, articulated in the 1950s, not only to be cultural, scientific, and artistic, but also industrial cities. Every work unit was a walled enclosure (or indeed several walled enclosures in the case of large *danwei*) which functioned simultaneously as unit of production and of social control; they played a crucial role in the distribution of urban welfare and specific rights of citizenship.<sup>i</sup> The wall, in most cases made of brick, formed the physical and psychological boundary to its surroundings.

Every *danwei* contained roadways to facilitate circulation within its walls, but vehicles without permit to circulate had to circumnavigate what in some cases were considerable obstacles posed by the *danwei* boundary walls. In the *danwei* structure the walls along the borders generally represented the external image with which the *danwei* communicated with the city. The wall was a tool to isolate the unit from the city space and signal its autonomy. Besides functioning as a physical barrier, the enclosure also defined the property and the social status of the *danwei*. The walls along the *danwei* borders contributed to the introverted nature of the place and shaped a sense of protection and identity in the community.<sup>ii</sup>

Since the 1990s, *danwei* walls have also been used as load-bearing structures for extension or new living spaces, while in more recent refurbishments of *danwei*, walls have been broken up and made more porous, replacing boundary walls with fences as a result of which some *danwei* have been slowly integrated into the wider city fabric.<sup>iii</sup>

An urban planning directive on management work in urban planning, issued by the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party's State Council on 21 February 2016, set out to further reduce the number of walls and fences in Chinese cities.

Article 16 of the relevant document states that no more enclosed residential compounds should be built and that already established enclosed compounds, including new, gated communities, should gradually open and make their internal roads publicly accessible (Xinhuashe 2016).

While much attention has been paid to the destruction of Chinese traditional housing, the conservation of socialist architectural traditions and urban forms has only recently started (Bonino and de Pieri 2015). These efforts have mostly focused on industrial *danwei* which are the type of *danwei* disappearing the fastest in the wake of the closure or privatization of state-owned industries. Many former industrial *danwei* have been turned into so called creative spaces (*chuangzaoqu* 创造区) as a result of a new policy announced in 2005 in which cultural creative industries were identified as new pillars of urban development (Hack, 2015; Zielke and Waibel, 2014). Non-production *danwei* like universities or medical units, and administrative *danwei* like ministries continue to develop and prosper; they have also seen significant changes in the range of services they provide and are incentivized to make more productive use of their land (Hack 2015: 76) which mostly affects the residential compounds associated with the *danwei*. Residential housing stock in *danwei*, mostly built between the 1950s and early 1980s, occupies a much larger footprint and lower density than the high-rise housing blocks of late. Often occupying prime real estate, they have been targeted for redevelopment.<sup>iv</sup> The fact that their ownership is complex and the management systems and revenues to maintain them lacking since the break-up of *danwei* as social governance structure, the housing stock is often neglected and the

conditions of many of the units very poor. This poor condition is often cited as the main reason why residents are relocated, and the old blocks are torn down, as explained and evidenced in case study 2. From a mere financial perspective, it is often advantageous to redevelop the sites and rehouse the occupants rather than invest in the maintenance or improvement of the housing stock (Hsing 2019). We know that this is a process fraught with difficulty and often characterized by abuse of rights and power (Shao 2013); yet sometimes residents are keen to move into higher quality accommodation (Repellino 2015a: 127). In some areas not yet marked for redevelopment the conditions of extreme poverty also produce a strong sense of frustration and being forgotten by the authorities (Repellino 2015a: 124).

The dominant narrative around urban redevelopment in China emphasizes the short-shrift and fast-paced development. However, the duration of the in-between state that occurs from the moment a decision to redevelop has been taken and the process of rehousing the original residents has started to the moment when actual demolition work gets underway can be significant. During this period traces of old communities and new, transient populations temporarily occupying newly vacated spaces create a particular urban environment made up of previous residents visiting the old neighborhood, residents' committees keeping up appearances, squatters in dilapidated blocks, mobile service providers like back-street hairdressers, the local state posting safety notices and information on helplines. They are joined by visitors to local offices or public services, providing additional clientele for street hawkers and local restaurants and shops, continuing life in an area whose ultimate demise is momentarily paused but obvious to all.

*Traces on walls, Walls as traces*

Once dominating the Chinese city, today *danwei* walls are mere traces of previous social and spatial forms. They can be considered what Wu Hung (2012) classifies as *yiji* 遗迹 (remnant traces) that serve as loci of political memory and expression but they also simultaneously serve as canvas and medium to host other traces in the form of writing and printing and other ways in which “space is shaped by politics and ideology” (Byrne 2018: 26). The old walls provide a medium on which a group of people, through linguistic and visual expression (closely linked in the Chinese language) assert that they are “still existing, taking up space and obdurately living” (Butler 2015: 18), but the walls themselves have become traces, too, existing as mere fragments of what before were connected structures defining living communities. It is these physical structures—the *danwei* walls as physical trace of China’s socialist past—rather than voices of individuals that stand at the heart of this study. The remnant *danwei* walls mark the gradual erasure of the socialist city; they symbolize the temporality of the material urban environment. In Heidegger’s terms the walls are both an objective presence (Vorhandenheit) and something that is ready to hand (zuhanden). Local actors, from the state to transient migrants and angry citizens, to whom the walls, now stripped of their significance as boundary and demarcation of socialist social structures, are ready to hand tools, leave visual traces on them which mediate their stories. Thus, the walls bear witness to the continued existence of humans in the here and now of these transforming spaces.<sup>v</sup> Many of the traces on the walls provide both direct and indirect commentary on the ways the different actors relate to each other during the process of urban transformation in post-socialist China.

I understand these visual traces as resulting from a form of linguistic and bodily performativity (Butler 2015: 8). Butler applies the concept of performativity to public demonstrations in the context of neoliberal market rationality. In her understanding,

this performativity is one that “only operates through a form of coordinated action, whose condition and aim is the reconstitution of plural forces of agency and social practices of resistance” (9). In my analysis, the bodies themselves are absent, but the visual traces are the result of physical bodies’ interaction with their environment; the traces, in particular where they are visuals that were painted or sprayed by hand, reflect the dynamic of the human body that guided the brush or spray can. They betray coordinated action and plural forces of agency, but not all the performativity observed in this study is an obvious act of resistance. Unlike in Butler’s demonstrations, the state is one of the multiple actors engaged in the linguistic and bodily performativity I analyze. These walls are spaces which not only allow all the actors to appear *to* each other (Arendt 1958, as quoted in Butler 2015: 72; my emphasis), but also *with* each other; they are public in the sense that the traces on them are openly visible to all who happen to pass them.<sup>vi</sup>

I first started to pay attention to these traces or *yiji* during extended walks and runs in major Chinese cities during a visit in 2018. As I was walking and running the city, I deviated from the all-weather running tracks the Chinese urban planners have laid down in the cities’ parks, but also “dropped my everyday relations” (De Certeau 2007[1993]) as academic bound to certain environments, allowing myself to be oriented through my interests and impulses, taking turns depending on signs and images that drew my attention. As Cheng Yi’en (2014: 221) says, walking (or running) is a particular form of embodied ethnography with inherent potential to be political; a practice that

allows a richer understanding of the city as a locus of encountering the discursive, material, and affective... , a process of moving that is necessarily

messy and complex – this is where the politics lie: to expose the precariousness of urban life, to face its fragility and (in)coherences as part of our everyday life.

The starting point of my itineraries were either locations I happened to find myself in as a result of meetings unrelated to this project or stops on the subway system I had chosen with the aim to explore new areas of a city. My only equipment was a smart phone that served as camera, notebook, and navigation tool. I always walked and ran on my own and never encountered any other runners on my itineraries. Noticing and recording the visual but not necessarily artistic interventions—what Spencer calls “visual social phenomena” (Spencer 2011: 12)—as they entered my field of vision during my runs was central to my methodology. Upon completion of each route, I recorded each in detail keeping an extensive diary of field notes that includes more than a thousand photographs.

Many different types of Chinese urban visual phenomena have been addressed in scholarship in recent years. Several focus on the language and visuals associated with the Chinese Dream propaganda campaign (Gow 2017; Landsberger 2018). Earlier work on graffiti focused on demolition and the character *chai* 拆 prominently stamped on buildings designated for destruction as well as artistic responses to it, most notably Zhang Dali’s work (Chau 2008; Marinelli 2004; 2018). More recently, Lu Pan (2017) places graffiti in the cultural context of writing and painting in public spaces as representations of power in China employing three key ideas of aura, carnival, and publicity; Liu and Dartnell (2020) catalogue twenty-five Beijing graffiti artists and their work. Going beyond graffiti in the western sense, Valjakka and Wang (Valjakka 2015; Valjakka and Wang 2018; Wang M. 2018) have written extensively on-site responsive art and artistic interventions and activism in both urban and rural China.



Beyond China, scholarly work on so called “legal walls” programmes in Singapore or Japan provides an interesting reference point (Chang 2019; Pan 2015).

Like Lu Pan (2017) in her definition of graffiti, I understand the visual traces at the heart of my study as premised on their site-specificity and occupying a unique topology in time and space. Just like Pan’s graffiti, the visual traces I analyze here exude a distinct quality that is anchored in their revelation of the interaction between the human body and the body of the built environment. They are evidence of what Heidegger calls human Dasein, the being in the here and now that is characterized by purposeful interaction with one’s immediate environment (Wheeler 2020). By hosting traces of human actors, *danwei* walls turn into crumbling documents providing evidence of the ways human bodies “assert and instate themselves in the midst of the political field” (Butler 2015: 11). This article provides a reading of these documents.

The data forming the three case studies is drawn from material collected during more than 300km of walking and running in three Chinese cities in April and May 2018. They include Yinghuayuan South Street near Hepingli close to the Sino-Japanese Friendship Hospital in Beijing (case study 1), Tiantan Xili to the immediate southwest of Tiantan Park also in Beijing (case study 2), and Puji Road in Shanghai’s Jing’an District just south of the city’s central railway station (case study 3). I first encountered all three areas through the methodology set out above and revisited each of them twice over three subsequent visits in November 2018, April 2019, and November 2019. These case studies were chosen as they capture different stages of the physical demise of the *danwei* as represented in the materiality of the walls in varying states of (dis)repair, from the intact wall in Yinghuayuan to the partially demolished structures in Tiantan Xili, to the last moments of the wall’s existence in Puji Road. The traces left on them, in turn, reflect the transforming relationship

between the multiple actors engaged in the linguistic and bodily performativity that produced them. Together—the walls as *yiji* and the visual traces left on them—they document a particular moment in China’s urban development.

This is a study of signs rather than voices; I provide a reading of visual social phenomena, contributing to the understanding of signifying practices in post-socialist urban China. Stephen Spencer (2011: 47) argues that the strength of visual ethnography lies in its ability to “capture the seemingly unremarkable signs of everyday life through visual depictions ... These details may be ... graffiti or a piece of street art *on* [my emphasis] the walls of a particular neighbourhood...” In my study, the walls themselves are an essential part of the visual analysis. My reading of traces—understood as signs on the walls as well as the walls themselves—tells a story of the ways in which humans interact with a very specific part of the built environment during China’s post-socialist transformation and of how relationships between these human actors change in the process.

### **Case Study 1: Yinghuayuan South Street**

Yinghuayuan South Street is a narrow, leafy lane in the Hepingli area near Beijing’s Sino-Japanese Friendship Hospital; its entire south side is flanked by a 370m long wall. The wall is a remnant of what would have been several *danwei* walls in the area and now belongs to Yinghuayuan community (*shequ* 社区). The community was founded in 1981 and includes more than 200 *danwei* including the China-Japan Friendship Hospital, Beijing University of Chemical Technology, Beijing Fashion College, and the University for Traditional Chinese Medicine. Detailed information on the composition of the community was provided in three densely written wall

panels of calligraphy at the western end of the street. could be read on three wall panels at the western end of the street.

The wall had previously been used as propaganda wall (*xuanchuan qiang* 宣传墙) for the family planning unit until it received its makeover in 2016. This was indicated by a metal sign mounted on the very first section at the eastern end of the wall. It explained that this art gallery, as the plaque called it, had originally opened in July 2003 and consisted of eighty-one art panels over 1100 square meters. The plaque stated that the wall had been created at the instigation of the Hepingjie Street Committee, and that its aim had been to contribute to all aspects of the family planning policy.

<Place figure 1 here>

Following the makeover in 2016, family planning propaganda was jettisoned, and the gallery was turned into a culture wall with a wider remit. Urban culture walls (*chengshi wenhua qiang* 城市文化墙) have been a development of the new millennium during which they have largely replaced previous propaganda walls, as in this case. A man called Wang Qi, founder of a company specializing in murals, is credited with having “invented” the urban culture wall as a response to the “psoriasis” of messy graffiti in the urban landscape with a view to creating an “eastern” urban atmosphere where people can “read Chinese civilization on the urban wall” (Wang 2012). Visual decorations on culture walls are painted with a brush rather than sprayed and therefore exhibit a very different aesthetic to sprayed-on graffiti. This aesthetic is present in the first few panels walking on the eastern end of the street

where the wall displays simple images of landscapes, flowers, and birds. These were painted directly onto the wall and were free of any slogans.

<Place figure 2 here>

Banned during a more revolutionary period, this type of scholarly painting aesthetic has become fairly ubiquitous in the urban visual landscape today. Its main purpose is the beautification of the urban environment. Similar projects have been observed in Bangkok (Herzfeld 2017) and Singapore (Chang 2019), but also in some Chinese villages (Wang 2018). Chinese urban murals found in residential areas often have a child-like or amateur quality, as the artists are mostly volunteers from within the community where they are displayed. This can partly be understood in the context of mass participation in art production as a communist ideal. Pan (2017: 243) analyzes an example of a “graffiti avenue” in Chongqing which was actively supported by the neighborhood within which it was erected and provided with free paint by local paint companies, and where more than 800 students and workers participated in its production. It can also be viewed through the lens of what De Kloet et.al. (2019) have referred to as the “imperative of creativity” in contemporary China, where creativity is harnessed in the context of soft power and the Chinese Dream.

This “imperative of creativity” is also evident in the next section of the wall on Yinghuayuan South Street onto which metal framed glass display cabinets are mounted. They contain photographs taken of artworks created by residents of the local community which included artificial flower arrangements, bead work, calligraphy and traditional ink paintings. According to the explanatory wall panels cited earlier, the Yinghuayuan residents’ committee was founded in 2001, and following city policy it established a *fuwuzhan* 服务站 (service station) in 2009 which provides activities for older people that include chess groups, choir, exercise classes,

English lessons, art classes, and other activities. In reality, the people “served” in such activity centers are mostly women no longer in employment. Art and craft classes are one way to engage this demographic in meaningful social activity with the double benefit of being able to use their artworks for decorative purposes and to validate the women’s role in the community by publicly displaying their work.

This section of displays was followed by several wall panels with metal placards displaying text and images mounted onto the wall which provided educational material around traditional Chinese culture, with an eclectic selection ranging from pearls of wisdom of Chinese medicine to simple stories aimed at children about eminent historical figures like Sima Guang and Li Bai, which also exist in animated form online.

<Place figure 3 here>

This educational material was followed by six panels on the twelve socialist core values.<sup>vii</sup> Each metal placard was dedicated to two of the values and provided quite detailed explanations which were illustrated by cartoon images. These images appear frequently in illustrations of the socialist core values and are available to download at various websites which cater for every occasion that might demand illustrative graphics, like birthdays, new year wishes, or father’s day. This lofty yet slightly humorous section was followed by a rather more prosaic glass cabinet containing notifications relevant to the community as well as several panels given over to the importance of separating refuse, with large-scale metal placards explaining different types of rubbish and how to properly dispose of them. (There was a recycling plant on the opposite side of this stretch of wall.) They, in turn were followed by several placards providing schematic information on party concerns and principles. The

explanatory calligraphy painted directly onto the last three panels of the wall referred to earlier concluded the display.

On the face of it, the wall seems an obvious example of propaganda where local residents employ creative means to show their support for the state project and the Chinese Dream by employing readily available imagery for decorative effect.

However, I think it warrants a more nuanced analysis. What is extraordinary about this wall is how the many different actors, from the central party state to the local art group, are sharing the same space for their linguistic and visual expressions. The central party state is represented in metal, denoting both permanence and durability. Metal is reserved for immutable party concerns and principles, including the twelve socialist core values and classic stories retold in new formats. Metal framed glass cabinets mounted onto the wall protect more state discourse in the form of meeting reports, but also youth awards and the photographs depicting artwork produced in classes run by the local service station. Unlike the immutable party structures and values, these displays are changed more frequently. The paintings on the wall itself are the most fragile as they can be most easily erased or defaced.

The different traces in the form of paintings, placards, and inscriptions are the result of highly choreographed and directed linguistic and bodily performativity. The *danwei* wall which serves as stage for this performance is a rare remnant and reminder of the previous structures that bound the community together, and the community to the state. Decorating it with paintings and art works along the entire length of the wall, whether painted by volunteers from the local community or digitally reproduced from online repositories, not only invokes a community that continues to exist despite the structural changes that have occurred, but the decorations also take on the quality of a protective armor. While graffiti (in the

western sense) is often found on walls set for destruction (as happened in Moganshan Road in Shanghai),<sup>viii</sup> the traces left on this *danwei* wall in Yingyuayuan South Street have a more protective quality. Indeed, unlike so many other walls I revisited over the course of 18 months, Yinghuayuan South Street was almost entirely unchanged in November 2019. There were no signs that the artwork had been vandalized or tampered with, nor could one see the common traces of notices or stamped-on telephone numbers, so prevalent in the next case study.

### **Case Study 2: Tiantan Xili Area**

Tiantan Xili, an area to the immediate southwest of Tiantan Park, like Yinghuayuan, is the site of several non-production *danwei* as well as a few small administrative *danwei*. Two hospitals and a number of smaller government organizations are located here and most of the car and foot traffic which winds its way through the narrow alley (Tiantan xihutong) alongside the wall enclosing it flows to and from these public buildings. In May 2018, the majority of the area surrounding the hospital and administrative buildings was occupied by old residential compounds, most of them derelict and already vacated. The inside face of the wall which forms the border to Yongdingmen Neidajie was in a bad state of repair. Plaster had fallen off it in many places, but it was bare of any notices or decorations, although one could clearly see the outlines and shadows of previous displays. From the patterns they left behind, they were the traces of posters and stickers and could be found on all the walls in this area bearing witness to what Børge Bakken (2017) in his work on Guangzhou calls the “uncivil society”, that is, the sector of society existing on the margins or outside the borders of legality. In this part of Beijing, the displays of uncivil society had been

ripped off the wall in attempts to restore a neater appearance if not to restore the walls themselves.

<Place figure 4 here>

One pale poster promoting socialist core values was pasted on the wall, half obscured by newly erected metal framed glass cabinets placed immediately in front of the wall, which displayed the official notices and information issued by the spiritual civilization construction propaganda department of Dongcheng district. The information consisted of dense writing running over several pages and display windows under the heading of “Nurturing a New Ridge in Socialist Civilization, Composing a Splendid Chapter in Dongcheng” exhorting the virtues of environmental renovation, ecological civilization, and green living accompanied by a small number of photographs taken at tree planting events and similar. One had to stand right in front of the displays in order to be able to read them, which was partly impossible due to parked cars. The shiny metal framed class cabinets were strikingly incongruent with the run-down appearance of the neighborhood.

<Place figure 5 here>

Further along the lane, the abandoned remnants of what in its heyday must have been a handsome residential compound consisting of a cluster of three storied buildings with communal spaces between them came into vision. The walls that used to enclose the compound had been partially destroyed. The apartments which were accessible via a balcony lay abandoned, and the communal space between them was filled with rubble and in part covered by green plastic sheets. Behind the blocks one could see prefabricated temporary workers’ housing characteristic of building sites, although no demolition let alone construction work had yet commenced.



On one section of the compound wall, which was still intact, an exhibition entitled Happy Life Photo Exhibition (*xingfu shenghuo sheyingzhan* 幸福生活摄影展) consisting of ten metal-framed posters had been mounted directly onto the old *danwei* wall. It was attributed to the residents' committee of the Tiantan Xili Beiqu community. Tiantan Xili Beiqu, the name of the now abandoned residential compound, had been built in the 1960s, but, as the first poster explained, in the course of time had fallen into disrepair with cracks opening in the walls, rotting and bursting plumbing pipes and generally unsanitary conditions. In response, a large-scale building scheme of residential housing in the Tiantan periphery was started in March 2015, consisting of fiftyseven blocks and 2414 residential units. In June 2017 the first proprietors moved into the new housing and the poster text spoke of their delight at its beautiful environment, the landscaped gardens, the light and ventilated apartments, which compared favorably to their previous damp and dark environment. As a result, the residents of the new blocks were looking forward to a beautiful and happy life in the future, the text concluded. From this one could deduce that the old residential compounds had stood empty for at least a year.

<Place figure 6 here>

The remaining six posters included no text apart from the title of the display. They each showed five photographs mounted onto the same background of blue skies and green fields, four of which showed images of the apparently happy life in the newly built blocks, including photos of the blocks themselves as well as smiling and waving residents playing with their children, pushing prams, sitting in the sun, playing chess. The fifth photograph on each poster showed examples of (what, in the absence of captions, the viewer was led to assume were images of) the conditions in

the old residential blocks of Tiantan Xili Beiqu, like unsafe wiring, unsanitary plumbing and facilities, broken stairs, and unsafe masonry.

<Place figure 7 here>

The rest of the walls around Tiantan Xili Beiqu were naked apart from the odd official notice, like a warning against illegal rents providing the number of a hotline to report such cases (a notice which appeared in several places in this area). At one of the still intact pillars of a (removed) entrance gate into Tiantan Xili Beiqu, somebody had pasted New Year couplets which still looked pristine two months after Chinese New Year. The bright red banners greeting the visitor to what was on the ground floor a partly demolished but in its main structure still intact residential building evoked a mix of defiance, irony, and care. The couplets read *Fu Wang Cai Wang Yunqi Wang; Jia Xing Ren Xing Shiye Xing* 福汪财汪运气汪，家兴人兴事业兴 (Happiness, prosperity, and luck flourish; families, people, and undertakings prosper.)

<Place figure 8 here>

Continuing further to the south, the wall enclosing the entire area borders directly onto the hutong on the western side, while an old residential compound called Tiantan Xili Nanqu extends east and south where it eventually merges into further residential blocks and compounds of varying vintage. Tiantan Xili Nanqu is larger than its counterpart to the north. Like Tiantan Xili Beiqu its borders used to be demarcated by a brick wall into which openings had now been knocked. While Tiantan Xili Beiqu—surrounded by roads on four sides which serve as a natural cordon—lay abandoned apart from the notices promoting and imposing civil order, Tiantan Xili Nanqu showed more signs of life. Like the walls in the northern section, traces of posters and notices of varying sizes were visible on the broken wall, but here the walls were also

decorated with sprayed or scribbled on information about hostels and rental opportunities.

In its heyday, Tiantan Xili would have been the bustling residential area associated with the administrative *danwei* whose offices and public buildings like the hospital are still in operation. As in Yinghuayuan South Street, the walls bear witness to the activities of the local residents. But while in Yinghuayuan South Street the traces of different actors—the state, the local residents committee, individual members of the community— were displayed on one intact piece of wall, in Tiantan Xili the traces were dispersed over various broken surfaces; different actors no longer used the same spaces. The state’s performance was protected behind an armor of steel and glass erected parallel to but immediately in front of the wall as though the crumbling walls designated for demolition could no longer be trusted to hold the state’s discourse. An acknowledgment of the continued existence of local residents was not only evident in these continued efforts to display the state’s discourse for local education in metal framed glass cabinets, but also in the many public notices on social governance. Unlike the high-level state discourse, these notices were simply stuck onto the now fragmented architectural structures of the dispersed community.

The aforementioned “Happy Life” photo exhibition mounted onto one of the old walls played a particularly interesting role here. Inside their metal frames, the photographs stood in immediate contrast to the fragile New Year’s paper couplets pasted onto the entrance into the derelict compound on whose enclosure the exhibition was mounted. The traditional red paper New Year’s couplet on each side of the entrance to one section of the compound was a strikingly effective and stubborn reminder that this structure had been home to “families, people, and undertakings” (as one part of the couplet read), while the metal posters referenced the same tradition

through their inclusion of happiness paper cuts in the windows of the new residential blocks. But while the couplet on the doorway implied that the home was still here, the “happy life” depicted in the photo exhibition was clearly elsewhere. All that remained of the former home were reminders of the allegedly ugly living conditions behind the very wall onto which the photos were mounted. Yet, both visual interventions referenced the same traditions, and both convened in a shared space created by this particular stretch of old *danwei* enclosure. This short piece of wall then was not just a remnant and reminder of the previous architectural structure but also of the community and the shared ground of debate that existed within it.

At the time of my first visit in May 2018, the previous community of residents had already been largely replaced by a more itinerant and temporary population, partly squatting in the vacated blocks. Most of the dilapidated walls in this area bore witness to the existence of these actors. Wall space was used for advertisements of illegal rental opportunities, either on pasted notices or through sprays and scribbles directly onto the walls. Attempts at eradicating these notices were equally evident on every surface. As Elizabeth Parke (2018: 273) suggests, such patterns can be understood as the territorializing of space by the itinerant population and the re-territorializing of the same space by the state and can be read as a metaphor for the “on-going negotiations between migrant workers, the state, and the market.” The traces created through the visual interventions by both actors provided a visible record of this type of social activity and negotiation, the remnant walls the precarious sheets of parchment constituting this urban archive. When I revisited the site six months later, very little had changed. The “Happy Life” photo exhibition was still there, if somewhat faded. Walls continued to be used for a mix of illegal and official messages, many of the latter emphasizing the importance of fire safety. No further

demolition had taken place; the previous *danwei* walls had not suffered further damage in addition to that already inflicted on my prior visit. The area seemed caught in a protracted moment of suspense, a prolonged pause of the forces of development during which the presence of human Dasein continued to leave traces on the ruins of the previous community structures.

<Place figure 9 here>

By November 2019 demolition on both Tiantan Xili Beiqu and Nanqu had begun but was not complete; no construction work had started. The northern section had been demolished and the residential blocks had been replaced with open spaces covered in grass and light snow enclosed by green wire fencing. The old trees had not met with the same fate as the houses; they remained standing in these newly created fields, testament perhaps to the state's commitment to "ecological civilization" and "green living" as exhorted in the exhibited state discourse at my first visit, indulging the passer-by in the illusion of established parkland. Yet, their presence, arranged in rows following the lines of the now demolished residential blocks between which they used to stand, also highlighted this new absence. The fences were bare of any notices, but the remaining, fractured walls continued to serve as medium of communication for the increasingly shrinking transient population of squatters. Wounds inflicted on half-demolished structures exposed private spaces only recently home to "families, people, and undertakings."

<Place figure 10 here>

### **Case Study 3: Puji Road, Shanghai**

Puji Road is a small road in Shanghai's Jing'an district just south of the city's main railway station. It runs off Hengfang Road in the Northeast, quickly reaching an

elevated level as it turns into a pedestrian footbridge over the Suzhou River. Here it flanks a recently completed office block which in style stands in contrast to the equally recently completed rebuilt warehouses along the Suzhou River. When I first walked along Puji Road in April 2018, the block was still a construction site, enclosed by a brick wall, which on one side ran parallel, but at a slightly lower level, to Puji Road. At the time I wandered past, the entire length of the wall was covered in big bold characters, one or two placed in each section of the wall.

<Place figure 11 here>

The slogan sprayed onto the part of the wall parallel to Puji Road was *zhengshang goujie qiya baixing yumin zhengli* 政商勾结欺压百姓与民争利 (Government and business collude to suppress the people and gain profit for themselves). Other sections of the wall displayed the previous address of the protesters which must have been where the building site was now located, the date, and a plethora of additional expressions of protest against forced eviction and corrupt local government and business. As I found out, the wall was whitewashed at the end of each day, but the same phrases were sprayed on again every night with the new day's date clearly visible. Judging from the many layers of white paint and the earliest date visible through the hastily completed, daily white-wash jobs, this local paint war of attrition had been going on for at least six weeks. When I revisited six months later, in November 2018, it was still in full swing and had extended beyond the brick wall flanking Puji Road, now also covering some of the blue metal hoardings forming part of the enclosure where the protest was written in messy red characters. Over-painting in white still took place on a daily basis during the days I visited.

<Place figure 12 here>

Although I never witnessed either the protesters or the white-washers, the traces that both left on this brick-and-mortar medium—itsself a trace of what was there before—bore vivid testimony to their debate. The traces on the wall were the result of both a linguistic and a bodily performativity, a coming together of bodies in a demonstration of both protest and power, played out not in an open demonstration in which people assemble but expressed in the dynamic of the sprayed characters and the bold strokes of white paint that tried to conceal them.

As with similar protests observed by Smith (2020) in Chongqing, or the attempts to hide the traces of the transient population in the Tiantan Xili case study, the erasure was always incomplete. Not only did the white paint stand out clearly from the plaster (as well as previous layers of paint) and the blue metal, but the outlines of the sprayed characters were always still visible underneath. As with all attempts at erasure of graffiti which one can observe in neatly painted squares all over the city, rather than denying the visual expression, it draws one's attention to it. As Smith (2020: 595) puts it, "erasing the graffiti did not achieve its absence but rather produced new socio-spatial effects." As with the Chongqing example documented by Smith, the acts of erasure in Puji Road simply became a reminder of the previous residents' opposition to their eviction, the meticulous painting over the accusations of injustice and corruption underscored rather than nullified the act of protest, both enabled by the existence of the walled enclosure. The daily act of erasure prompted a daily act of protest, keeping the performance alive without ever seeing the performers themselves in action. Paradoxically, leaving the protest untouched and visible would have been a far more effective way of silencing it by denying the possibility of any further performance and turning it into yesterday's news.

But through the daily provision of a new blank canvas, the protesters were able to continue to demonstrate that they were “still existing, taking up space and obdurately living” (Butler 2015: 18) in this space through their spraying of an ephemeral yet obstinate message onto a temporary medium. Indeed, what put an end to the performance was the removal of the medium itself, that is, the tearing down of the enclosure which had served as stage for this particular piece of performance. In April 2019, the building had been nearly finished and stood unencumbered by enclosing structures on three sides while the original brick wall flanking Puji Road—battered and thick with layers of paint—was slogan free and guarded by two security guards (whom I could not capture on camera) vigilantly scanning passers-by, its final demise only a matter of time. The removal of the wall then becomes the final act of destruction and silencing, eradicating the last trace of previous physical structures and communities, but also destroying a medium allowing for the appearance and disappearance of traces that bear witness to the actions of human bodies belonging to these former communities engaged in daily negotiation, debate, and discontent.

<Place figure 13 here>

## **Discussion**

This article has analyzed the “seemingly unremarkable signs of everyday life” (Spencer 2011: 47) as captured through visual and walking ethnography of three case studies. By looking closely at the traces different actors had left on the walls, I tried to reveal complexities and patterns that transcend the local situation connecting it to larger processes of change. Each case study focused on a stretch of road bordered by existing or former *danwei* walls, a key component of socialist town planning which



has been transformed and disappearing in the wake of post-socialist urban development.

Each of the case studies captures a different moment in the transformation and ultimate demise of the *danwei* both as an architectural feature and as a social structure. Once dominating the socialist city, *danwei* walls now stand fractured, disconnected, at times artfully integrated with the surrounding urban fabric in their broken-down form (Repellino 2015b), but mostly left to their fate of ultimate destruction. In this protracted moment of transition, the local communities continue to engage with these walls. In Yinghuayuan South Street, the most affluent and hence most thriving of the three case studies with the youngest housing stock whose residents belong to prestigious non-production *danwei* (several universities and a famous hospital), the walls showcase the local community's creativity and awareness of the state's expectations and discourses. On this long stretch of wall, all levels of governance, from the central state to the local "service station" are represented and united in a carefully choreographed display. While no doubt an example of the way local residents are co-opted into the production of propaganda, a more nuanced reading reveals many interesting layers. The different materiality of the traces, ranging from printed metal placards, printed posters, photographs of community artwork behind glass frames, to hand painted murals, reflects the varying degrees of fragility and ephemerality of the actors who produced them. The delicately hand-painted murals, left unprotected, are easily defaced or erased while the state's discourse is shielded behind glass and metal.

In Yinghuayuan South Street, the *danwei* wall still serves as reliable medium for the expression of a range of different performances within a well-defined space, both literal and metaphorical; the traces of these performances, on the other hand, serve as

protective shield for the wall itself. The wall provides as a space where all actors can appear and display their performance of unity. The wall's linear, 370m long existence starts with the individual performance of the community painter and ends in the metal placards holding the central state's principles, illustrating at horizontal street level the vertical integration of the individual and local with the center.

In Tiantan Xili, situated in a less affluent area than Yinghuayuan South Street with its housing stock dating back to the 1960s, we can no longer detect this unity of actors on one stage as the forces of change have moved in. All the different levels of governance evident on one single wall in Yinghuayuan are still represented in Tiantan Xili, but they no longer interact with the local structures (both architectural and social) in equal measure. While local residents and the street committee still share the same wall space for their performances both of which focus on the homes (old and new) and people who inhabit(ed) them, the local and central state have retreated behind the newly erected armor of steel and glass cabinets cemented into the ground. In other sections of the same area, the walls, partially destroyed to lay open the alleys running behind them, host the traces of a more transient, possibly "uncivil" society (Bakken 2017) in the form of sprayed on characters hinting at rental opportunities and backstreet hairdressers, stamped on telephone numbers, and residue from adhesive where notices had been taken down. The state makes its presence felt in impersonal notices and political banners with messages that are not site specific and can be found all over the city. The broken-down walls in Tiantan Xili represent the breakdown of integration and consensus, yet still provide a space for the various actors' plural and performative right to appear and allow for their bodies to be "asserted and instated in the midst of the political field" (Butler 2015: 11).

The same can be argued, to a degree, for the wall in Puji Road which we encountered in the last days of its existence. Here the actors leaving their traces had been reduced to the protesting former residents and the daily white-washers while all others merely looked on. But even though the traces left by the former residents of Puji Road were erased every evening, the wall still served as a space of appearance and shared medium, however entrenched the positions may have been. The hand-painted Chinese landscapes, the “Happy Life” exhibition and shadows of notices on the walls in Tiantan Xili, and the crudely sprayed protest slogan on Puji Road all bear witness to the way in which people engage with their urban environment as it goes through a transition up until the moment of its final destruction.

Both Yinghuayuan South Street and Tiantan Xili include examples of the next stage in the development when the *danwei* wall is gone or considered too fragile for the state, at least, to appear on it. Sturdy glass cabinets in metal frames were mounted onto the *danwei* wall in Yinghuayuan South Street and literally doubled up the wall in Tiantan Xili, where, in the absence of a community, the wall was stripped bare and no longer used as medium by the relevant street committee. Instead, it had erected free standing metal frames holding glass display cabinets cemented into the ground. While for the local state these cabinets serve a similar function to a wall, they are also crucially different. Glass cabinets in metal frames are not open access; they require privileged access to publish displays. They are difficult to violate without considerable force, providing protective armour for the messages and images they hold. These display cabinets have an almost totemic quality. They are easily visible monuments whose existence registers with the passer-by without drawing much attention to the display itself but serving as a distinctive symbol of power and of the state’s presence.

Local actors continue to interact with the walls or fragments thereof until their ultimate demise. With walls rapidly disappearing and temporary enclosures increasingly made of corrugated plastic or covered in artificial grass, pavements are sometimes used to display phone numbers or small adverts (Parke 2018), yet they are a much less generous and effective host. Where physical notice boards made of brick disappear, digital ones often take their place, or indeed co-exist with and complement the physical spaces, as Morris (2020) has shown.

In the rapidly changing urban environment of 21<sup>st</sup> century China, remnant *danwei* walls are historical documents characteristic of a unique moment in the transformation of the Chinese urban fabric. They stand as remnants and reminders of social structures and units whose borders they used to demarcate. Seemingly unremarkable, they are diminishing traces in the urban landscape, and the traces left on them by different actors constitute ephemeral discursive and subjective signs which warrant close reading before they disappear. To paraphrase Spencer (2011: 84), features of the walls “echo internally and leave their traces on the psyche long after they have been reshaped or demolished.”

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<sup>i</sup> Dutton (1998) writes about the psychological function of walls in socialist China; Lee-Wong (2018) focuses on the wall in their exploration of the sociohistorical perspective on the Chinese conceptualization of space. Bray (2005) provides a comprehensive overview of the *danwei* as unit of social governance. Wang Xiaoshuai's 2019 film *Di Jiu Tian Chang* (So Long, My Son) carefully depicts the confined living arrangements and complex social relations, at once intimate and invasive, that emerged in this intersection of private lives and state interests which the *danwei* represented.

<sup>ii</sup> See Rapellino 2015a, 122; also Rapellino 2015b, 143-144.

<sup>iii</sup> Piper Gaubatz (2008) has written about Chinese urban planning, including the reduction of walls and the creation of more open spaces and malls.

<sup>iv</sup> For a detailed treatment of the processes and the complex and mutually beneficial relationship between local government and commercial developers see Hsing (2010) and Shao (2013).

<sup>v</sup> For Heidegger I have relied on Long (2001) and Wheeler (2020).

<sup>vi</sup> For a detailed engagement with the concept of public space in Chinese urban town planning see Sun (2020).

<sup>vii</sup> For an analysis of the Twelve Socialist Core Values see Gow (2017).

<sup>viii</sup> Moganshan Road in Shanghai bordered a large scale building site whose walls of enclosure were used as canvas for graffiti artists in the 2010s. In 2019, the brick walls hosting the art were destroyed and replaced with ridged plastic panels that do not provide a good surface for painting or spraying. All visual creative expression in the area is now contained within the formal M50 art space at one end of Moganshan

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Road. The systematic replacement of brick walls with enclosures made of different materials that do not lend themselves to leaving spontaneous visual traces is a separate strand emerging from my data and will be dealt with in a separate article.