Monumentality and Anti-monumentality in Wenda Gu's Forest of Stone Steles - Retranslation and Rewriting of Tang Poetry

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What is monumentality? I wish to distinguish this notion from the term monumental in the common sense. The latter generally refers to those huge, enduring and solemn buildings or statues, which because of their physical size, quality and form are called monuments (or monumental); anyone passing a marble obelisk or bronze statue habitually refers to it as a 'monument', even if he or she has no knowledge about the meaning of these statues or buildings. Monumentality refers to an integral element, which lends a building, statue, or any large-scale structure a common commemorative meaning, or refers to the collective memory contained within these physical models. Early in the 20th century, in his "Modern Worship of Monument: Its Nature and Orgins", the famous Austrian art historian and theoretician, Alois Riegl, suggested that monumentality is not just represented by buildings or statues of a celebrated type that are specifically intended to commemorate something, but that the range should also contain examples that were not deliberately conceived as such, as well as anything that accrues value through time such as the remains of ancient civilizations or important historic documents. Viewed from another standpoint, John Brinckerhoff Jackson, an American architect, noticed that after the civil war, a request came from across the nation to pronounce the Gettysburg battlefield a national monument: 'Never before has there been a glebe of many thousands acres, across so much farmland and roads been transformed into a monument to an historic event such as happened here'. This fact made Jackson decide that 'a monument could be of any form'; it does not have to be a formidable building, not an artifice; 'a monument could be a rough stone or a log; it could be the relic of the ruined wall in Jerusalem; it could even be a tree or a cross'.

So what is anti-monumentality? This notion is linked closely with the anti-authority and anti-tradition of avant-garde art. As mentioned above, 'monumentality' makes a building, a statue or an object a carrier of collective memory, but traditionally, monuments reflect the control and shaping of collective memory by political and religious authorities. The Latin root of monumentality means recalling and admonishing. In order to exercise the function of admonition, official monuments always are awesome, majestic and inhuman buildings; their huge mass quality controls the public space in which they are placed. Therefore, French scholar George Bataille called such monuments as dikes antagonizing humanity. 'It is through the forms of cathedrals and palaces, that the church and the state can admonish the common people, and keep them silent'. So it is understandable that avant-garde artists, in their stance as rebels, treat the monument as a persistent object of attack. Actually, we can say that all types of avant-garde art has a tendency to topple official monuments and monumentality. An example of such an artist is Claes Oldenburg, a modern American artist. He designed a series of anti-monuments, including a huge pair of scissors which imitated the Washington Monument (see Figure 1). He explained this project thus: 'Obviously, these scissors imitate the Washington Monument in form, but at the same time presents some interesting differences, such as the difference between metal and stone, between urban modern style and exuberant archaism, as well as the confrontation between flexibility and rigidity'.

The linguistic system of this anti-monumentality thus depends on two factors, i.e. the corporeality of toppling traditional monuments including size, quality and shape, as well as ideas of immortality, grandiosity and stillness, which these physical factors present; another factor is overthrowing the monumentality of traditional monuments, principally their authority and public presence, and the social orders and political rules which converge in them. Within contemporary Chinese art, the pursuit of anti-monumentality became an important phenomena of post-Revolutionary art, and its

5. Haskel, B., Claes Oldenburg; Object into Moment (Pasadena, California, 1971) p59.
political and social causes speak for themselves. Analysing closely their magnum opus, we see that artists carry out this pursuit in two directions. One is to create counter-monuments, and the other is an attempt to achieve real anti-monuments. The former topples traditional monumentality by subverting official monuments; as a result of which there emerges a new form of personalized monument. The latter rejects any form of monument, and achieves a sense of absolute anti-monumentality through this rejection. The magnum opus of the former includes the many experimental art projects that have been sited on the Great Wall, and its cause clearly responds to the traditional symbol of the Great Wall: as the principle symbol of China, this famous ancient building actually represents a political and historic identification with modern China. Relatively, the works that could be termed anti-monumental are few in number, because such work must be entirely conceptual, and the form itself becomes the object of deconstructive exercises.

Wenda Gu was one of the first artists to probe deeply the realm of anti-monumentality, and make an important contribution to the emergence and development of this trend. Early in the mid-1980s, he created the first series of word-formation works, deconstructing traditional calligraphy (Figure 2). His skillful and powerful seal scripts retained their focus on calligraphy in line with conventional forms of beauty and traditional culture, but their scopic and unreadable scripts spurned the function of traditional calligraphy to express meaning. This is important because calligraphy is esteemed on the basis of traditional calligraphy and painting techniques, whilst seal script has been closely linked with inscription, and is always treated as a special media of legal documents (such as bronze inscriptions and Emperor Qin’s inscriptions), Wenda Gu’s series invokes a clear, implicit sense of anti-authority and anti-monumentality, and thus became one of the most influential forms of conceptual art in the ’85 New Art movement.

The United Nations Monuments, which Wenda Gu began to create from the beginning of the 1990s, reflected a new development of this tendency of anti-authority: this series of huge installations challenges traditional monuments, meanwhile establishing a new type of antagonistic monument. Similar to Claes Oldenburg’s idea, Wenda Gu abandons the corporality of traditional monuments and their overawing sense of the eternal, choosing instead the most meaningless relics from the human body, i.e. hair, to create a series consecrated to different peoples and races (Figure 3). The difference from Oldenburg is that Wenda Gu was able to see his project through to the end, whereby, due to the magnificence of these monumental forms, people are encouraged to think not only of a specific fine idea or concept, but also a variety of paradoxes in the nature of antagonistic monuments. One of these paradoxes is Wenda Gu’s obsession with visual spectacle. Similar to his early word-formation seal scripts, visuality and theatricality are the most convulsing factor of these works. We can say that this interest in visuality is common to all antagonistic monuments, but Wenda Gu’s visual spectacle makes the rejection of the eternal a precondition: the scripts and patterns formed of hair are like imprints of water and ink placed in a huge space, without weight and substantiality.

The second of the paradoxes manifest within the work is the perseverance of collective ideas of nation, race and state; some projects (for example, Hong Kong Monument) were created for the memory of important historic event (the Hong Kong handover in 1997)(Figure 4). If it is said that traditional monuments present the expressions of political or religious authority on such collectives. Wenda Gu used the hair collected from local barbers to symbolize a collection of endless ‘individuals’. So much hair evoked a sense of tragedy for the viewers, as if the works were less about life, than about death; and these “monuments” do not commemorate heroes or epic national or state history, but the self-devotion and sacrifice of many people for these histories. On this point, Wenda Gu’s United States is analogous with the Vietnam War Monument designed by Maya Lin and erected before.

We can think further about the logic and meanings of Forest of Stone Steles - A Retranslation and Rewriting of Tang Poetry. Wenda Gu began to conceive of this project in 1993, and twelve years later in 2004, it was finished. So its invention actually came in parallel with the United Nations project, both reflecting the different aspects of artist's imagination and creativity, and their relationship, similarities and differences can be understood clearly through a comparative analysis of them. Firstly, the two projects required an epic production process. Both take on similar dimensions and visual dynamism. Both could be considered supereminent antagonistic monuments; the embodiment of monumental expression at a time when traditional monuments are being challenged in a trend towards personalizing human culture. However, there are important differences between these two works, the first of which lies in their corporeality and visuality; if the United Nations would be considered as illusory, dimly discernible and non-material, Forest of Stone Steles - A Retranslation and Rewriting of Tang Poetry should be actual, stable and heavy. These material and visual differences come from the different objects each seeks to commemorate— if the United Nations was framed with the world, in my opinion, Forest of Stone Steles is personalized monument that Wenda Gu has erected for Chinese culture. Because the artist is rooted in this culture and retains close links to it, this project’s deconstruction of traditional monuments and construction of anti-monumentality is more difficult, zigzagging, deep and absurd, and imbued with a depth that, if sited within the United States could be incomparable.

Two inspirations of this project - a forest of stone steles and Tang poetry - are also linked with the monumentality of Chinese tradition. As we see in his own introduction to this project, Wenda Gu supports this: "There are many important forests of stone steles in Chinese history. The Forest of Stone Steles is a splendid historic and epic fact of Chinese nation. It is a fine, rich museum. It centralizes history, culture, art and technology. Similarly, in his opinion, Tang poetry is a comparable relic of Chinese literature: "There are numerous commentaries on and explanations of Tang poetry from many dynastic periods." Obviously, Wenda Gu positions Forest of Stone Steles: Retranslation and Rewriting of Tang Poetry as a "contemporary forest of stone steles", and as a unique commentary and re-translation of Tang poetry, thus linking this project with the monumental tradition in Chinese culture.

But, it would be a mistake to say that Gu's project "belongs" to this tradition. There are three principles present that suggest he inherited the tradition while criticizing and expanding it. Above all, his understanding of the Forest of Stone Steles doesn't rest on traditional notions. The study and appreciation of steles in Chinese traditional culture focuses on the historic and artistic value of stele inscriptions; the production and rubbing of steles by common craftsmen are barely given consideration. But in Gu's concept, the importance of the Forest of Stone Steles depends upon it being perceived as the turning point of cultural invention, creation and inheritance. His project therefore includes a complete documentary video of the production and rubbings of the steles: from the quarry to the carving studio, from the ink to the rubbing, viewers discern the progress of this project. Even we can say that, it is the first time the complete document of production, carving and rubbings of such stele has been produced, and as a result, the original Forest of Stone Steles has a new within meaning in Gu's project: it not only symbolizes the passing splendour of Chinese culture, but also parts of contemporary Chinese culture, continually linked with the life and work of the common people. It is not only an historic relic and museum, but also the source for an experimental artist's inspiration, re-created as a personalized work of contemporary art. It is worth noting that, while many contemporary art works are executed by assistants or artisans, until now the contribution of these persons was rarely acknowledged. Gu's video records not only the production process, but also the relationship between the people involved in the process. Therefore, Forest of Stone Steles has a communal and democratic feel which the traditional forest of stone steles lacks.

Secondly, while he calls his work Forest of Stone Steles, Wenda Gu didn't imitate the form of the
traditional steles. Traditional steles were made from a heavy, vertically up-ended stone block, erected upon a foundation (figure 6). There are inscriptions on both sides of the stone stele, recording Confucian classics, emperors’ inscriptions and all kinds of legal and commemorative documents. These were erected in officially designated locations, in schools, temples and cemeteries, and became instruments of propaganda, the object of viewing and emulating—famous stele inscriptions might be used to make repeated rubbings and copies and became the model of studying calligraphy and writing styles. Bu’s Forest of Stone Steles is not made of these typical steles. The project he designed involves stone steles horizontally laid down on the ground, carved with patterns, and incised with scripts in the upper face (figure 7). The antitype of this stele is the historic epitaph, which emerged after the Han Dynasty, and became popular in the Sui and Tang Dynasties (figure 8). Different from the steles erected in public places, the epitaph steles were buried in tombs, the inscriptions carved upon them were neither Confucian classics nor government inscriptions, but an obituary for the deceased. While Wenda Gu does not explain why he employed the form of epitaph steles, in the eyes of viewers familiar with traditional Chinese sculpture, his steles have a physique and meaning different from traditional steles. If we say that the Forest of Stone Steles in Xi’an pivots on a collection of those famous public steles sited overground (figure 8), then Forest of Stone Steles - A Retranslation and Rewriting of Tang Poetry seems evoke an impression of the underground, of closed-in space, and death.

Thirdly, no matter whether over- or underground, upright stone stele or horizontal epitaph, as well as being either inscribed with the classics, historical inscriptions or obituaries, these carved inscriptions in traditional culture were considered as standard or conclusive evidence of history-carrying in hard stone itself is an affirmation of the immutability of history. However, Wenda Gu’s carved inscriptions on each of the stele in this project have an opposite intention; not to express an historic conclusion, but the impossibility of concluding. In his own words, from these steles one can experience “the absurd and ironic predicament of a new culture in the course of formation” and recognize the phenomena and result which the imprecision and the impossibility of being precise within cross-culture translations engenders. In my opinion, it is the most absolute and profound expression of anti-monumentality in Forest of Stone Steles, further reflected in the artist’s personal identification and observation of the contemporary world. It is worthy of further analysis.

Forest of Stone Steles: A Retranslation and Rewriting of Tang Poetry comprises fifty steles, with four different forms of Tang poetry carved on each of them, all achieved through three sequential translations of different types as outlined here.

1. The original Tang poetry and English text were translated based on literal meanings and carved on the right of the steles. Gu employed the most popular and common version of the Chinese and English texts of these poems, and abandoned the scholarship of critics. Chinese Tang poetry written in standard Fang Song script; the English translating texts were from Witter Bynner’s The Jade Mountain, a popular early English translation of Tang poetry.

2. The principle inscriptions carved in the centre of the steles comprise the Chinese text re-translated from Bynner’s English translation based on the sound of the poem. Gu called this translating text as English sounds simulating Chinese characters. But this simulating procedure is not mechanical: it is vulnerable to subjectivity. Wenda Gu selected the Chinese characters to resemble closely the English sounds but which have some special meaning that allowed the phonetic translation the possibility of being read. Meanwhile, the characters he employed for writing these simulated Chinese characters he reconstructed himself. Therefore, the principle inscriptions manifest a quality of cutting both ways, and in their speciosity, seem a mid-phase in the process of being transformation, thus implying the possibility of further transformation.

3. The text carved in the right side is the English translation re-translated from the principle inscription and based on the meaning. While there is still a high chance of illogicality, the result of translating further enhances the readability of the principle texts in the center of steles, and
transforms it from being a puzzle or an absurd collection of single characters into a literal writing with defined rules of grammar, and literary sense.

According to Wenda Gu's own introduction, this imprecision and untranslatability have become a common puzzle in the course of modern world globalization to him. He wrote: "Creating a modern forest of stone steles is an idea that came to me six years after I emigrated to the USA. During this time, different world cultures, particularly American multiculture, experienced a crisis of identification and re-identification, from so-called Americanism to the era of Asia. With the changes of world politics and economics, we are experiencing a transformation and re-combination of culture-centralism and world brinkmanship". Combined with his above discussion of the significance of symbolic nationalism, we can see clearly the nature of monumentality and anti-monumentality in Wenda Gu's Forest of Stone Steles: A Retranslation and Rewriting of Tang Poetry: this is a monumental work has a profound sense of history, agglomerating Gu's traditional culture education with his respect for Chinese culture. On the other hand, this is a deconstructive work full of modernity, reflecting his deep suspicion of the broader macroscopical complexities of narration and the forces of globalization. The result is a monumental integration of idealism amidst a sense of crisis. And just in this sense, Forest of Stone Steles: Retranslation and Rewriting of Tang Poetry becomes exactly that "cultural document of an age of transformation" Wenda Gu set out to achieve.

Translated by David Mao