# Art and Identity in the Forbidden City: Paradox in *One Day in 2004 No. 6*

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## ABSTRACT

**Abstract:** By representing and manipulating locations that hold widespread cultural significance, artists mediate the relationship between individuals and city spaces. The photographic work of Cui Xiuwen explores the complexity of identity formation in the Forbidden City, the political center of China. Studying the nuances of her piece *One Day in 2004 No. 6* reveals the tension of the relationship between the body and the spaces it inhabits. Though Cui has emphasized the dominating presence of Tiananmen Gate looming over her youthful female figure, the image also supports the agency of this young girl. Rather than defining the piece as a representation of either the subordination to the weight of cultural history or the assertion of individual identity, this paper recognizes the paradox inherent in the work. In my analysis of the photographic image, I embrace contradictory readings of its meaning to emphasize the importance of visual culture in how individuals define themselves in city spaces. The paper draws on the shifting cultural meaning of Tiananmen Gate and contextualizes Cui's work with pieces by other contemporary Chinese artists, including Hu Ming and Lin Xin, engaging in similar themes. Analyzing specific elements of Cui's piece, such as the Young Pioneer's uniform and the young girl's cyborg hand, reveals the significance of gender when considering identity formation in the Forbidden City. This paper outlines the subtleties of Cui's artwork to place it in conversation with academic and artistic representations of the Forbidden City, as the historical significance of this space continues to influence self-conception.

## Introduction

Cui Xiuwen's One Day in *2004 No. 6* (fig. 1) depicts a youthful female figure collapsed in the foreground of the image, drawing the viewer into the scene with a limply outstretched transparent, mechanical hand. Her pure white uniform glows against the flat red background of Tiananmen Gate, missing Mao's iconic portrait. The bright red scarf of the Young Pioneers constricts the figure's neck and draws the eye towards her face. Imperfect creases in her dress echo the expression of exhaustion in her slightly parted lips, bruised eyes, and pain-filled gaze. Small portions of the figure's soft skin imply a sense of vulnerability and humanness in contrast to the massive, uniform architecture behind her. However, her position at the very front of the image, blocking entry into the city, produces a unique sense of agency. The figure has no shadow beneath her, and the manufactured texture of her clothes and skin make her appear as if she were pasted onto the image. She is separate from the sun-lit roof of the building behind her that exists in real space. Rather than clearly defining the figure's relationship with her surroundings, the image requires the viewer to embrace its ambiguity. This invites consideration of the complex connections between people and space.



OPEN ACCESS

Citation: O'Connor, Katie. (2023) "Art and Identity in the Forbidden City: Paradox in *One Day in 2004 No. 6*." Spectrum, Issue No. 10

doi: 10.29173/spectrum182

Received: May 2022
Accepted: August 2022
Published: May 2023

The selected focal work is the sixth in a series titled *One Day in 2004*. In this series, Cui Xiuwen looks towards an uncertain future by placing a young body in a city space embedded with cultural history that has been, as Maya Kóvskaya notes, "rendered unspeakable in the post-89 era."[1] Cui followed *One Day in 2004* with another series evoking similar themes, titled *Angel* (fig. 2). This series also depicts a young female model haunted by the red walls of the Forbidden City, but in these photographic works the model is pregnant. Cui made this choice to focus her social criticism on the ways gender identity and sexuality are formulated within the city space. Critics and Cui herself have defined these works as engaging with the tension between complicity and innocence, presenting a child "bear[ing] the weight of the consequences of history."[2] These assessments of the work argue that history manifested in physical space dominates individual identity formation. While there are elements in the image that support this reading of the piece, there is also suggestive evidence for a contrary reading.

This essay will trace the paradox in Cui Xiuwen's representation of the Tiananmen Gate. Michael Schaffer defines paradoxes as "consist[ing] of jointly contradictory sets of statements that are individually plausible or believable."[3] While the piece supports the artist's claims that the space dominates the figure, it also allows for an alternative reading that the historically embedded location is what enables the figure to form her subjective identity. Tiananmen Square is often reflected upon in contemporary Chinese art, as artists draw on the cultural significance of this space to re-define it in meaningful ways. Unraveling the intricate connections between Cui's central figure and Tiananmen Gate requires consideration of both the figure's subordination to the historical monument, and the artist's use of Tiananmen's social importance to draw attention to this young girl.

Initially, the analysis will focus on the space itself by considering the location of the image and the history of Tiananmen square. Particularly, I will discuss its potency as a setting for revolution, and the re-writings of history that have occurred within this space since the end of the Imperial Era. In support of Cui's own view of her work, I will analyze how the gate has become anthropomorphized and synonymous with former chairman Mao Zedong. To provide a counterpoint to this argument, I will then compare the figure to the Goddess of Democracy, which was constructed and destroyed in Tiananmen Square during the student protests of 1989. This discussion will consider how monuments, even ephemeral ones such as the Goddess of Democracy, affect identity formation by marking historical significance in contemporary city spaces. This will lead to a consideration of how the young female figure's body is presented. In this section I will discuss the ways the Young Pioneer's uniform inhibits this young girl from asserting her subjective gender identity. To conclude, I will shift to focus on the visual manipulations of the physical space and the figure's body in the photograph, as Cui's digital alteration of this scene enacts a new kind of revolution, re-writing of history, and re-claiming of identity. In this section, I will highlight the cyborg element of the young girl's body to explore how identity formation can occur or reoccur differently in a digital space compared to a city space. The digital space allows the figure to explore her own subjective identity. These subtleties and contradictions in Cui's image mirror the complexity of identity formation in the city space, as individuals are influenced by innumerable forces including buildings, monuments, clothing, and digital images.

## The Space

While it is impossible to provide a comprehensive analysis of how all these factors affect individuals, *One Day in 2004 No. 6* demonstrates the significance of historically embedded spaces like Tiananmen Square in identity formation. In "The Symbolism of Place: A Geography of Relationships Between Space, Power, and Identity," Jerome Monnet outlines the symbolic dimension of space. Monnet claims that "[s]ymbolization can also be seen as one of the major factors differentiating space into places, since this process endows a portion of space with a name, an identity, permanence, a reason for existing, and a particular relationship with certain values and meanings. This all contributes to the existential advent


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of places in the eyes of those frequenting or imagining them."[4] *One Day in 2004 No. 6* evokes the symbolic meaning of Tiananmen Square, as it reflects upon the material space from a photographic distance. The image displays the identity of the space that exists beyond its physical location. Artistic representations like Cui's image simultaneously reinscribe and remove the authority of culturally important locations. This allows artists to re-define how people relate to these spaces.

## Anthropomorphism

Tiananmen Square, due to its unique role in Chinese history, has a particularly personified identity in comparison to other historical spaces. In his analysis of the cultural significance of the square, *Remaking Beijing: Tiananmen Square and the Creation of a Political Space*, Wu Hung claims that it is "an architectural site that provides a locus of coalescence for political expression, collective memory, identity and history. Recognized as such, the Square has been —and will continue to be—a prime visual means of political rhetoric in modern China to address the public and to constitute the public itself."[5] In his writing, Wu outlines the role of historically significant spaces, like the Forbidden City and its main entrance Tiananmen Gate, in identity formation. The Communist Party of China utilized the influence the Forbidden City had on identity formation from the Imperial Era for their own political purposes. In the process of re-defining the Forbidden City, the People's Republic transformed Tiananmen Square into an open public space. This became the new central point of the city, rather than the throne hall in the imperial palace.[6] The most notable addition to this space was Chairman Mao's portrait which was initially displayed in 1949. This portrait has been changed and updated every year even after the Chairman's death. Art historian Francesca Dal Lago discusses the iconography of Mao's portrait both on Tiananmen Gate and as it became widely disseminated as a commodity. She considers the way that the icon of Mao "acts."[7] His portrait becomes more than just a symbolic presence but personifies the gate, embodying China's break from the Imperial past. This portrait anthropomorphizes Tiananmen Gate itself as Mao's image gazes over those in the square, demanding a sense of authority. The meanings of this icon have been challenged and reinterpreted, particularly after the 1989 massacre that occurred in Tiananmen Square after Mao's death, but under the view of his portrait. In his review of the exhibition, "New Art in China, Post-1989," Xiaoping Ling notes that as Mao became a part of pop culture during the Mao craze, artists began to reflect critically on the different meanings signified by this image.[8]

One of these artistic reflections, *Tiananmen* by Zeng Fangzhi (fig. 3), emblematizes the personification of Tiananmen Gate. The transparent outline of Mao's face painted in a fluid style is depicted as becoming synonymous with the architecture of the gate itself. Placing this piece into conversation with Cui Xiuwen's *One Day in 2004 No. 6* highlights the artist's own argument, which suggests that the space and its historical significance asserts unquestionable dominance over the young female figure. Although Mao's portrait is not depicted on the gate in Cui's image, the gate has become an anthropomorphic version of Mao because they are so intertwined; Mao's portrait does not need to be directly depicted to assert his authority over the space. The image of Mao has been interpreted, particularly in the post 1989 era, as a mask disguising the violence that occurred in the square.[9] Cui's removal of the portrait signifies both its power and its mask-like qualities. She removes Mao's mask and reveals a young girl, collapsed on the ground with bruises on her face and knees. This girl symbolizes the trauma that has occurred in the square and continues to be impressed upon collective cultural memory. Reading the piece in this way supports the argument that Tiananmen gate and square are embedded with so much history that individual identities are lost in these spaces. Even if the space is empty and visual cultural signifiers of the revolution are removed, the young girl is still implicated in the history of this space unable to define herself within it.

## Monumentality

Despite the historical weight of Tiananmen square, it has the potential to be appropriated and given new significance. In *Gendered Bodies: Toward a Women's*


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*Visual Art in Contemporary China*, Cui Shuqin notes that "[t]he meaning conferred on the monument is historically contingent; the monument does not remain a static physical or architectural object."[10] Tiananmen Gate is monumentalized by its historical associations with multiple revolutions. However, its monumentality does not necessarily have to be read as dominating the female figure in Cui's image. There is visual evidence in the piece that the gate is instead supporting the monumentalization of the young girl herself. As noted by Harold L. Khan, monumentality is not only connected to history, but also exemplifies political significance.[11] Monuments were also utilized for political purposes by the Communist Party of China, erecting monuments like the Monument to the People's Heroes and eventually Mao's Mausoleum in Tiananmen square. The level of multifaceted importance that monumental objects hold allows them to affect identity formation within the city space. Wu Hung echoes Cui Shuqin's analysis, claiming that despite their deeply entrenched historical and political associations, the meanings of monuments are fluid and changeable. He conceptualizes dominant and dominated monuments, which distinguish the triumphant monuments from those that are sanctuaries and places of refuge.[12] Tiananmen Square and the other monuments within it have been both dominant and dominated at different points in history.

One of the most significant monuments in Tiananmen Square that changed the meaning of the space was the Goddess of Democracy. This was a 10-meter-high white paper mache statue raised to face Mao's portrait during the student protests of 1989. A striking image of this monument (fig. 4) depicts the figure surrounded by the students who created her. Although the sculpture is somewhat based on the Statue of Liberty, it is unquestionably embedded with its own meaning as it represents a young Chinese woman supporting a specific Chinese revolution.[13] While the Goddess of Democracy stood, she dominated Tiananmen square and utilized this location to emphasize her revolutionary purpose. Comparing this image to Cui's figure in *One Day in 2004 No. 6* showcases the monumentality of the young girl located in this same space. Although she is defeated on the ground, she centrally frames the way the viewer encounters Tiananmen gate. By blocking the path into the city, and taking up nearly half of the image horizontally, the figure portrays a different strength than the Goddess of Democracy. Rather than facing the gate, compelling the mask of Mao's portrait to be taken off, she faces outward. This frames the viewer's interaction with Tiananmen Gate through a personal encounter, urging the viewer to consider the figure's individual identity. She gains her own monumentality by turning Tiananmen into a dominated monumental space. The gate establishes and supports the figure's identity as she draws on the history and memory of the space to re-define it with her own presence. By visually prioritizing a single figure over Tiananmen, Cui displays the ability of individuals to assert subjectivity within a historically and politically embedded space rather than being dominated by it.

## The Body

The complex relationship between this young female figure and the space she occupies requires consideration of the representation of her body. Cui Shuqin discusses the significance of the female bodies in Chinese art, stating "Once neglected in Chinese art tradition, suppressed under socialist ideology, and lately commodified by commercial culture, the body now appears in art by women as a gendered subject and visual medium rich with cultural meaning."[14] *One Day in 2004 No. 6* is an example of representing the female body in a creative way to engage it in social and political discourse. This body engages intricately with how gender is defined in the city space, as gender identity and the various connotations of the female body are inscribed even upon this young child. Drawing on the implications of the female body and the historical connotations of Tiananmen gate, Cui's work considers the influence of the past on the future that this young child represents.

## The Uniform

While this young girl symbolizes the future, her clothes reflect on China's history. Clothing is important to consider when discussing identity formation because it is an object of visual culture that mediates how the


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body and the city space interact. Within the context of the Forbidden City, clothing determines an individual's role and how they are connected to the history and politics of the city. The uniform worn by the young figure in Cui's piece is a Young Pioneer's uniform. The Young Pioneers are an organization in China run by The Communist Youth League and The Communist Party of China who wear a widely recognizable uniform, complete with a red scarf that symbolizes the blood of the people's heroes or the martyrs of the communist revolution.[15] Just as clothing played an important role in the Manchu presentation of a cultural identity in the Qing dynasty,[16] Li Li notes the political and cultural significance of uniform specifically stating, "[c]lothing, as it is recognized by scholars, is the historical and cultural construction of embodied identity; wearing uniforms… thus exemplifies 'a group identity.'"[17] The Young Pioneer's uniform creates a collective identity among children. These uniforms were also represented in the Communist Party of China's political propaganda, which included graphic posters and short stories that display children in these uniforms in groups and idealized settings to communicate the party's ideologies.

In this propaganda, young boys and girls would generally be represented in similar ways to embody Mao's famous claim that "women hold up half the sky." The idealized women in socialist China were often highly masculinized, usually in military or combative roles and never in domestic settings or in traditionally signified feminine spaces. This was intended to support the Communist political movement which was centered on a collective identity as workers rather than separating women and men. Tina Mai Chen analyzes the representations of the female tractor driver in CCP (Chinese Communist Party) propaganda that "represented the arrival of a socialist modernity contingent upon shattering the fetters of Confucian, feudal and capitalist worldviews and their attendant patriarchal forms."[18] However, Mai Chen also critiques the socialist representations of gender, stating that "agency was located within a state authored feminism, the represented experiences of women models therefore remind us that women participated in individual, national, and international liberation but not under conditions of their own making."[19] Many contemporary artists engage with this lack of subjectivity for women in socialist China. Uniforms contribute to this ideological conception greatly because they make unity visible. Hu Ming explores the significance of clothing, particularly uniforms, in her oil painting Stand Up (fig. 5). This work depicts a singular adult woman in a line of men, all wearing military uniforms. The female figure's uniform is translucent, revealing her body beneath in a sexualized way to subvert socialist codes of gender which demanded a repression of sexuality to assert female subjectivity. This painting supports Calvin Hui's determination that "In a gender utopia, the women should be able to dress and behave in a masculine way, in a feminine way, both, or neither."[20] Comparing this image to *One Day in 2004 No. 6* demonstrates how the Young Pioneer's Uniform contributes to dominating the young girl. While Hu's figure is an adult woman, re-asserting herself within the visual rhetoric of an idealized group commonly presented in political propaganda, the young girl in Cui's piece is removed from the idealized group context, laying by herself, collapsed on the ground. The universal signifiers of her uniform are also taken out of their idealized status, as the red scarf pulls around her neck and the pristine white uniform is crumpled. Hu's image reveals the limitations these socialist uniforms place on women, and though her figure is able to defy these limitations, Cui's figure cannot. By choosing to represent a young girl rather than a young boy, Cui deconstructs the idealized vision of China as a socialist utopia in which men and women are equal. Cui's defeated figure is unable to assert her subjective identity in the overwhelming political discourse that dictates a specific and limited kind of femininity, embodied by her uniform.

## The Cyborg

Though her clothing limits the young girl in Cui's image, her cyborg hand alludes to alternative modes of constructing identity in the city space. Cyborg bodies and references to the digital realm are a common theme in feminist art. Many feminists conceptualize these digital spaces as places where individuals may escape the realities of binary gender norms and re-


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discover their potentials. This is because patriarchal norms that are heavily embedded in the real world do not necessarily apply in digital spaces. Cui Shuqin identifies that cyborgs have similar possibilities, stating that "[the] blending of woman and machine disrupts social cultural hierarchies and gender difference dichotomies." Female cyborgs have a subversive potential, as their bodies are constructed to be capable, powerful, and superior to all humans. Cui also claims that "[c]yberspace, nonetheless, is not a place detached completely from the social-physical world. It is a created space in which individuals may escape from the conventional world or reevaluate it from alternative perspectives."[22] This is essential to consider when reading feminist works that engage with cyborgs or digital re-imaginings of space. Although digital manipulation alludes to a space other than that of material reality, digital works do not completely separate themselves from the physical world, and often reflect on the real world in productive and critical ways. History and culture are essential to successful feminist critique as illustrated in *One Day in 2004 No. 6.* Another work that engages with these themes of the cyborg body and digital realm as spaces to re-define gender identity is Metal Mask 004 by Wuhan artist Lin Xin (fig. 6). The cyborg in this image does not have visual markers of femininity or masculinity, and firmly asserts its separation from material reality inside the borders of the computer screen. Although some have claimed that Cui's use of photoshop and manipulation of the physical space dissociates the figure in *One Day in 2004 No. 6* completely from her surroundings,[23] the use of such an iconic landmark like Tiananmen gate proves that this is not an accurate reading of the digital manipulation occurring in the image. Lin Xin's work does not have the same impact as Cui's because the image does not refer to significant cultural history or depict a location directly associated with revolution. The context provided by Tiananmen allows the figure in *One Day in 2004 No. 6* to assert more authority as an individual than if she were depicted without it. The small cyborg hand at the front of the image makes the digital alterations of the image obvious, including the removal of Mao's portrait. The digitized hand, a useful part of the body that is associated with action, can be seen as the hand of the artist. She alters the space of Tiananmen to draw attention to the individual identity of this young girl and allow her to assert a subjectivity that is ineffectual in reality.

## Conclusion

Reading the paradox in Cui's image explores the intricacies of identity formation in the city space, particularly within a space as historically complicated as the Forbidden City. *One Day in 2004 No. 6* reveals the dominance of the anthropomorphic gate which embodies multiple political and historical identities and overwhelms the young female figure. Simultaneously, the monumentality of the gate is challenged by the presence of the young female figure, who asserts her own subjectivity by interacting critically with the space. The depiction of her body visualizes how this young girl has become unjustly implicated in the political and historical discourses of space through her uniform, which denies her subjectivity. However, alluding to a space beyond the corporeal in which Tiananmen Square can be altered allows the figure to assert authority. This artistic choice draws on feminist techniques that utilize the digital to re-define gender identities. This digitally altered photograph depicts a figure who struggles to determine her identity in this space due to her age and gender. As the viewer recognizes the young girl's struggle without disregarding the indications of her personal strength in the attempt to find subjectivity in the Forbidden City, the complex role of various forms of visual culture in identity formation unfolds. Studying the interplay between domination and resistance in this artwork identifies two opposing conceptual aspects of the piece: methods of subjugation and techniques of subversion. Both are equally essential to understand and consider in specific political contexts. The obscurity in *One Day in 2004 No. 6* epitomizes the tension created by artistic reproductions of physical spaces that hold authority as Tiananmen does, both recognizing its dominance and contending with it to inspect the intricacies of the city space.


doi 10.29173/spectrum182

## Figure Links

Fig. 1: Cui Xiuwen. One Day in 2004 No. 6. 2005. Chromogenic print. 94.6 x 125.7 cm. Private Collection. Source: "Half the Sky, Artworks by Asian Women Artists." Christies. Accessed October 15, 2021. https://onlineonly.christies.com/s/half-sky-artworks-asian-women-artists/one-day-2004-no-6-35/34099.

Cui Xiuwen. Angel No. 11. 2006. Chromogenic print. 119 x 100 cm. Eli Klein Gallery.
Source: "Angel No.11, 2006." Artsy. Accessed October 15, 2021. https://www.artsy.net/artwork/cui-xiuwen-angel-no-dot-11.

Fig. 3: Zeng Fangzhi. Tiananmen. 2004. Oil on canvas; 215 x 330 cm. London Saatchi Gallery.
Source: Claypool, Lisa. "1989." PowerPoint Presentation. October 27, 2021. https://publicdelivery.org/zeng-fanzhi-last-supper/

Fig. 4: The Goddess of Democracy in Tiananmen Square, 1989. Courtesy: Getty. Photograph: Peter Charlesworth.
Source: Morris, Kadish. "Tiananmen's Goddess of Democracy: Remembering a Pillar of Defiance." June 4, 2019. https://www.frieze.com/article/tiananmens-goddess-democracy-remembering-pillar-defiance.

Fig. 5: Hu Ming. Stand Up. 2007. Oil Painting. 140 x 106 cm. Collection unknown. Source: "The Oil Painting of Hu Ming." Hu Ming Office. Accessed November 25, 2021. http://hu-ming.com/all_list/07/index.html.

Fig. 6: Lin Xin. Metal Mask 004. 2011. Digital screenshot. Canton-Sardine. Source: "SubHuman: a feminist contemplation of the body." Canton-Sardine. Accessed November 12, 2021. https://canton-sardine.com/2021/08/06/subhuman-a-feminist-contemplation-of-the-body/.


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11. Harold L. Kahn, "A Matter of Taste: The Monumental and Exotic in the Qianlong Reign," in *The Elegant Brush: Chinese Painting Under the Qianlong Emperor 1735-1795* (Phoenix Art Museum, 1985), 291.
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23. Cui, 60-61


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doi 10.29173/spectrum182