CROWDS AND PASSIVITY IN ASIA

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The intellectual problem of the crowd falls under the heading of mereology—the subdivision of ontology that deals with parts, wholes, and their relations. Do crowds exist, or does the expression “crowd” merely transmit a value-judgment (as in “two’s company, but three’s a crowd”)? What is the mode of existence of a crowd? Is a crowd adequately accounted for as (and thus, merely) the sum of the individuals composing it? Or is it a collective subject acting in ways that transcend the intentions of any of its participants? Is it a collection of defective subjects, individuals whose power of choice has been hypnotized away, and thus the vast plaything of the one presumably whole individual who manipulates it? Is it a collection of individuals, each doing and seeing what the individual might do in any case, but whose total power is somehow more than the sum of its parts, a case of “emergent behavior”? Determining what a crowd is has some of the complexity of another battlefield of reductionism, the definitional dispute surrounding reports of thought and reports of brain activity.

Much of the high ground in these disputes is pre-theoretical. Language allows us to take sides without being aware of so doing. A great deal can hang on an article, a capital letter, a comma. The difficulty can be captured in a sentence from Geoffrey Hartman’s first book, André Malraux. In it he describes Malraux’s last novel, Les Noyers de l’Altenburg (The Walnut Trees of Altenburg), as the surviving part...
Whether as a part of many other compounds ("heti zi") designating "crowd" or as a monosyllabic simple word ("duti zi"), the Chinese word "zhong" illuminates two abysses of meaning in the Chinese language in terms of both syntax and semantics.

Compounds designate words consisting of two or more parts, each of which can itself be an independent word. The first abyss of meaning lies in the gaps and clashes of meanings among the two or more parts of a compound. As a part of the compound words designating "crowd," "zhong" juxtaposes other words to form two-syllable compounds like "qunzhong," "dazhong," "zhongren" etc. Being able to be both noun and adjective, like many other Chinese words which can be more than one part of speech, "zhong"’s meanings are:

- as noun: multitude, everyone, everything, all official, soldier, army, slave, monk number;

The abyss of meaning (or the clashes) between the two monosyllabic words in, e.g. "qunzhong" is thus:

- "qun" (as noun: crowd, group, common people; as quantifier: herd, group, flock; as verb: to join; as adjective: in crowds, in flocks, in groups) ("A New Dictionary of Modern Chinese Language," 1992: 1359-1360) and
- "zhong."

As a simple monosyllabic word, "zhong" also has its own dissectible abysses – the second abyss. From its ancient form to its modern simplified form used in Mainland

of “a larger work destroyed by Nazis.” iv Not “destroyed by the Nazis,” as a more conventional wording would have it—the the serving to singularize the twelve-year experience of National Socialist terror and war, to give Nazism the qualities of a proper noun (definiteness, public notoriety, collective personality). Rather, whether intentionally or by an inspired typographical error, Hartman’s dropping the the reduced those Nazis to the condition of an anonymous swarm, a periodic chance event like locusts, dry rot or flood. As if to say: “Destroyed by Nazis—one of those things that happens.” Sheltered from explicit discussion, an article, a bit of punctuation, a pairing of verb and subject mark a collectivity (such as a crowd) as having this or that type of duration, consistency, agency, purpose.

These classic problems of crowd theory—ochlology?—fall in line with some of the classic positions in the study of Asia, for if Asia is home to a majority of the human race, the populousness of Asia has long been described as a mere plurality without individuality, a passive reservoir of labor-power awaiting orders from an imperial throne—in short, a crowd of the “defective” kind, observed by individuals who see themselves as members of a purposive historical movement (Christianity, progress, the dialectics of freedom, etc.).v Montesquieu’s, Herder’s and Hegel’s understandings of Asia as the preindividual soup from which (and in contradistinction to which) European individuality arose, resolve into a psychological application of mereology and an anticipation of later crowd studies. ■

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iii See for example Daniel C. Dennett, Consciousness Explained (Boston: Little-Brown, 1991).
China, “zhong” is basically formed by combining three ren words – each of them is a pictograph visualizing apparently a person, and symbolically human being in general.

Xu Shen (A.D. 30-124) categorizes the word as “huiyi”—combination of different meaning-elements to make a new meaning. In the case of the word “zhong” comprised of three “ren” words, which are pictographic, one could argue that seeing three persons together symbolically is in effect a pictographic representation of a crowd. It is the gaps and clashes among, as well as combinations of these three persons that form “zhong’s” pictographic and semantic dimensions.

But why three? The “Discourses of the States (Guoyu)” explicates that “three persons make the crowd” (“A Concordance of the Guoyu,” 1999: 2). But why not two or four, or even more? In some Buddhist classics, “zhong” is defined as more than four, up to hundreds, thousands and infinity (“Tiantai guan jing shu”), more than four up to twelve thousand (“Fa hua yi shu”), as well as simply more than three (“Fa hua xuan zan”). But the number three does have special implications in Chinese culture, as in many other cultures as well. In “Lao zi,” three is the path to everything. “Shuowen jiezi” explicates that “Three, the way of the sky, the ground, and the human” (Xu, 1981: 15). One can further speculate on the meanings of “yu” and “dao” in line with their constituent character “ren”. But their lack of direct relevance to the pictographic quality of the word “ren” is indeed a very meaningful frustration for people who merely comprehend Chinese characters as pictographic. The pictographic category contains only less than 10% of Chinese characters from the Han dynasty (B.C.206-A.D.220) to the present.

In pre-Qin (pre-221 B.C.) historical, literary, ritual and philosophizing works, for example, “The Book of Songs,” “The Analects,” “The Book of Rites…” etc., “zhong,” meaning plenty and many, appears in connection with people already.

Apart from its connection with people, “zhong” can also be used in relation to animals and things. In “The Sorting Which Evens Things Out” (“Qi wu lun”) in “Zhuangzi,” “zhong” can also be an adjective for the monkeys (if they are not simply regarded as ancestors of human being) (Zhuangzi, 1981: 54). Regarding things, “zhong” designates just “many things,” as in “The Book of Rites” “Zhongni yanju” in which social order and

Crowd Control

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Crowds promote a sense of identification and belonging, prompting possibilities of action individual inhibition might prohibit. But they might equally give rise to fear and loathing, avoidance and flight. The surge of a crowd can exhilarate; but it can also threaten. The crowd at a large sporting event or political rally suggests support for a team or cause, energizing action; but it can also spiral out of hand, fuelling violence, calling forth surveillance and indeed crowd control. A group in fusion, to use the Sartrean formulation, can grow quickly into a crowd, an internally coherent collective with at least a finite and more or less well-defined purpose; but it can also be established from without, its boundaries imposed for the purposes of oversight and order. The former logic is well known by anyone who has witnessed fan-fare at a sporting event or concert, or suffered through a convention; a recent experience while traveling will serve to exemplify the latter more clearly.

Israel seems to have perfected the security apparatus of almost absolute surveillance predicated on what we might usefully call controlling the chaos of, or in, a crowd. The point is to promote panic among a population or crowd of people, at once observing—gaining insight into—the reactions of members of the multitude. Random attacks in public places, invasions, unannounced searches, bombs apparently missing targets, purposeful collateral damage in public places: all this always visited on those assumed to be ethnорacially distinct, as already possibly suspect, exhibiting habits, behavioral dispositions, and cultural expressions deemed peculiar. The point of creating controlled chaos in crowded places is to force those present to resort to “natural instinct,” to flush out those trying for what is considered terrorizing purposes to blend in by making manifest their cultural habits, their hidden difference, uncovering their hidden agenda. Crowd control becomes a matter of checking out reactions to the randomization of reaction in the face of dramatically unpredictable possibilities.

On a recent visit to Israel we had an impossibly early morning flight that required a 3:00 a.m. airport check-in. If driving across darkened highways, the twinkling lights of Tel Aviv off to the side, conjured the alienation of Godard’s “Alphaville,” arriving at the airport was more like “City of Lost Children.” Expecting relative sleepiness at the airport, we were shocked to find ourselves in a terminal busier than any airport worldwide at the height of rush hour. Pressed between seven or eight layers of formal security passage from the entrance to the airport until one boarded the
disorder are connected to “the motions of all things [‘zhong’]” (“A Concordance of the Li ji,” 1992: 137) [my translation]. In the Tang poet Du Fu’s (A.D. 712-770) poem “Staring at the Mountains” (“Wang yue”), “zhong” also describes specific things like mountains.

Later in Chinese Buddhist terms, “zhong” is about both Buddhist believer and human beings in general. In “Chapters of the Mahayana Doctrines” (“Dacheng yi zhang”), the “zhong,” meaning “many” or “everyone,” becomes a constituent in the term “he zhong,” a term designating Buddhist monk. “Ci yuan” considers that the term “dazhong” derives from this use (“Ci yuan,” 1979: 2215). “Zhong” lingers between ordinary people in general and certain (kinds of) people in particular.

In his critiques of the Chinese national character, the modern writer Lu Xun (A.D. 1881-1936) twists “zhong’s” reference to people in general in a national context when China was encountering Western challenges, modernity and modernization. In his short story title “Shizhong” (Lu Xun, 1990, 291-298), the word “zhong” corresponds to the English word “crowd,” meaning “a mass of spectators,” “an audience,” and “a collection of actors playing the part of a crowd” (“Oxford English Dictionary”). Alluding to a Chinese crowd apathetically standing around a man accused by the Japanese of spying for the Russians during the Russo-Japanese War, the story focuses upon the spectators, sketching out the way passers-by rudely and curiously look for better positions to view the spectacle, of which they know little. The title of the story “Shizhong” is twofold: it denotes both “showing things to the crowd” (like in the saying “zhan shou ‘shi’ ‘zhong’” [cutting the head off and showing it to the public/crowd]) and “revealing the crowd as spectacle” (zhan “shi” qun “zhong” [showing the crowd]). The former is obviously about showing spectacle, and the latter creating spectacle. Lu Xun saw the incident in a slide show when he was a student in Japan. And his short story writing is in effect a kind of media transference in which the crowd is turned into a spectacle and this spectacle is re-turned to the reading public.

Such an affinity between revelation and the crowd in the compound “shizhong” is telling. Like the crowd seeing things revealed and the crowd being revealed, the mentioned abysses of meaning also reveal, and get revealed.

Watching over all of this seemingly random chaos were further layers of all-seeing eyes, some mingling easily in the crowd, others overhead, picking out panic, distinguishing difference amidst sleep-deprived activity: a too-quick movement, furtive looks, sweat on the brow, foam at the corners of the mouth, too obvious attempts to blend in, a mixed couple traveling under different names, on different national passports signaling different places of origin. The civic equivalent, one might say, of carpet-bombing Baghdad. Insecurity manifest through unnerving norms. Security predicated on acute insecurity, the heat of a familiar crowd edging to the margins the heat of one made unfamiliar, unheimlich, uncanny. Belonging, longing to be—in this case part of something—is always predicated on a distinguishing absence, on the constitutive outside(r).

Street savviness takes over, the product of intuitions minted on the anvil of years of air travel but also of anti-apartheid street protests wending their way between “Casspirs Full of Love,” as William Kentridge so aptly characterizes apartheid’s armored vehicles, and Central Park summer pop concerts featuring the likes of Diana Ross. Surging crowds constituted through exploding tear gas canisters and flying dum dums, snatched jewelry and jockeying for prime position across the span of decades. The political surge of 1970s crowds, the pop of 1980s public culture, the privatizing docility of 1990s libertarianism give way to born-again paranoias of strangers at the gate, of conjured crowds breaking down the boundaries of Babylon, their members careening into buildings exploding dreams along with bodies. That fraternal crowd, the one of supposed support across otherwise anonymous and fragmented folks—the Harley rally, the hundred or so scooters on an Amsterdam Sunday street outside my window, their collective fumes and furious motorized humdrum invading my thoughts as I write this, the parade of this or that group for this or that cause, or for sheer entertainment or whiling away an otherwise lonesome weekend—harboring, even occasionally cultivating the seeds of something more insidious, more threatening because less thoughtful, selfconscious, uncritical.

A sense of safety gives way to the defensive society, to states of security. The surge of the protesting crowd is considered now an internal threat, an unpatriotic act akin to, if not in cahoots with, the foreign terrorist. Crowd control secures not just behavior but beliefs too.
SOURCES


"Dacheng yi zhang" (Chapters of the Mahayana Doctrines) http://www.bya.org.hk/html/T44/1851_013.htm


Entry by Ka-Fai Yau

ZHONG FIGURE LIST

Fig. 1 The various scripts of the word zhong
(Hanyu dazidian, 1986: 3051-3052)

Fig. 2 The various scripts of the word ren
(Zhongwen da cidian, 1962: 737)