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Missing Footage at the AAS

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Chinese scholar prevented from attending

By Timothy Cheek

The Roundtable session at this year’s annual meeting of the Association for Asian Studies (AAS) in Philadelphia was titled “Against Amnesia: History, Memory and the Role of Public Intellectuals in 21st Century China.” A mix of scholars from China and North America were scheduled to report and discuss, but at the last minute our featured speaker, Ms. Cui Weiping (崔卫平) of the Beijing Film Academy, could not attend. She was prevented from leaving China for the roundtable even though she had been specially invited by the AAS and had her passport, US visa, and air tickets in hand. She was given the news verbally by Chinese “authorities” just a few days before the meeting. (A New York Times story on the subject can be found here.)

The irony is obvious. While we gathered to speak about amnesia in the past (I was a late addition to the panel), here was a new kind of amnesia in the making. Cui Weiping is a talented documentary film-maker dedicated to giving voice to sectors of China’s society that have been forgotten in the cheerful story of reform and development. Her contribution to the roundtable was central to our topic of historical forgetting, and we were looking forward to Professor Cui’s presentation of clips from her various documentary films and comments on her work as a public intellectual. But those film clips and her presence became the most important missing footage of the AAS meetings this year.

In the strange world of government control in the 21st century, while the Chinese authorities successfully prevented Professor Cui from coming to Philadelphia, we were able to show a few PowerPoint images that she could e-mail to us! Indeed, you can also follow her Twitter exchanges on these developments. Still, at least for older scholars amongst us, the limited benefits of the Internet are overshadowed by this denial of the freedom to travel without reason. It is a sad and sorry return to earlier days when China was closed off from the world. It left us wondering: what is the message the Chinese government wants to send?

Students of China know that it is unwise to speak of “China this” and “China that,” as often happens in the popular media. China, even with a one-party state at the helm, is not a uniform place: there are important differences among different leaders, different levels of government, and various regions within China, not to mention a vibrant range of social groups. Is this case a matter of a local authority—in this instance the city of Beijing or particular local leaders—getting heavy-handed, or is this the current policy of the PRC? Arbitrary restriction on the free travel of scholars, when they have made the legally required arrangements for international travel, is just not acceptable in civilized circles. We can only hope that the government of China will rectify this unfortunate case, but we can assure all that we will not let this, too, slip into the realm of amnesia.

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Tags: AAS