

## **Dr. Norman Bethune: Biographical Objects and Exhibitions**

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Volume 72, 2010

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/mcr72ere01>

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### Publisher(s)

National Museums of Canada

### ISSN

1718-1259 (print)

1927-9264 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this document

Lerner, L. (2010). Dr. Norman Bethune: Biographical Objects and Exhibitions. *Material Culture Review*, 72, 51–61.

# Exhibition Review Essay

## Essai de compte rendu d'exposition

LOREN LERNER

### Dr. Norman Bethune: Biographical Objects and Exhibitions

*Ding Ho/Group of 7*

Venues: McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg, ON (2000)  
Mendel Art Gallery, Saskatoon, SK (2001)

*Norman Bethune – Trail of Solidarity – La huella solidaria*

Venue: McCord Museum of Canadian History, Montreal, QC (2009)

In 1972, Canada designated Dr. Norman Bethune as someone of “national historic significance.”<sup>1</sup> Since then, numerous artworks, objects and artifacts have been used to construct his biographical narrative. This has included the Bethune Memorial House in Gravenhurst, Ontario where he was born, public monuments and exhibitions of paintings, sculptures, photographs, films, documents and personal items that call forth Bethune’s personality, values, beliefs and accomplishments.

In biographical exhibitions, objects are imbued with biographical significance and narrative meaning (Hoskins 1998). Integral to this concept is the capacity of objects to evoke the characteristics and events associated with that person (Albano 2007: 16). This essay explores the use of biographical objects in two temporary exhibitions relating to Bethune: the *Ding Ho/Group of 7* exhibition<sup>2</sup> at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection in Kleinburg, Ontario (2000), and *Norman Bethune – Trail of Solidarity* at the McCord Museum of Canadian History in Montreal (2009). By examining particular biographical objects associated with Bethune in these exhibitions, I demonstrate how certain objects connected to Bethune’s experiences have acquired new and different meanings as a result of their coming into contact with individuals in China and Spain, respectively. I will look at how the objects found resonance with contemporary artist Gu Xiong in China and Professor Jesus Majada in Spain. Central to this discussion is the idea that an object

can acquire diverse connotations over time and if situated in different places and circumstances. This then is called object biography,<sup>3</sup> when an object accrues meaning through its part in social processes and interactions (Gosden and Marshall 1999: 169). In this regard, the principal properties of an object’s biography—its **genealogy, use, exchange and movement**—can affect its purpose and meaning because of different individual and collective associations (Appadurai 1988).

The first part of this essay presents a descriptive analysis and historical overview of the two exhibitions. What then follows is a close reading of the biographical objects associated with Bethune’s life and their meaning for Xiong and Majada. I will situate this discussion in relation to philosophical insights on biography, politics and society gleaned from the writings of Michel Foucault and Hannah Arendt. Foucault contributes to the idea that meaning “is based not so much on the permanence and uniqueness of an object as on the space in which various objects emerge and are continuously transformed” (2002: 36). Helping to structure the analysis are Arendt’s observations on how a person’s actions and pronouncements are dependent on their retrospective articulation by historians and narrators (1958: 184). Finally, Arendt’s proposal that freedom can only be derived from a person’s action in the public arena (1968: 146) will be contrasted with Foucault’s idea of freedom as personal resistance and creative process (Oksala 2005: 168).

## ***Ding Ho/Group of 7, McMichael Canadian Art Collection***

Even as Canadians grew more aware of Bethune in the 1970s—through the creation of Bethune Memorial House, the gift from China to Montreal in 1976 of a statue of Bethune, and the corpus of books, magazine articles and films produced on Bethune—few Canadians had any real idea of the meaning he held for the people of China. In 1936, Bethune went to China at the request of the American and Canadian League for Peace and Democracy. The Sino-Japanese war was in full swing and the situation in the north, where Mao Zedong had his headquarters, was desperate: supplies and doctors were scarce and many of the wounded were being left to die. As health consultant to the border regions of Shan-Shi, Tas-Ha-Erh and Hopei, Bethune coordinated medical services for the wounded, opened the compact International Peace Hospital and established short-term training courses that graduated medical personnel every six weeks. In addition, he performed countless surgical operations day and night at the front. On November 12, 1939, Bethune died of blood poisoning, acquired when he cut his finger while operating on a soldier.

Bethune's work in China remains largely unknown to Canadians today, despite the fact that many Canadian visitors to China in recent decades have toured the various official memorials built to glorify Bethune, including the thirty-five-bed Model Hospital at Sung-yen K'ou, which was destroyed by Japanese forces but later reconstructed as a monument. In fact, many sites connected to Bethune—his bomb shelter in the side of a hill, a former Buddhist temple he converted into an operating room, the houses where he lived—have been restored as museums. In 1950, Bethune's body was moved from its original tomb at Nan Kuang to a mausoleum in the Cemetery of Martyrs in Shijiazhuang. Dedicated to the over three million Chinese soldiers who died in the war of resistance, the cemetery is located in Yuyuantan Park, which is also home to a statue of Bethune identical to the one at Place Norman Bethune in Montreal. Across the street is the 800-bed Norman Bethune International Peace Hospital, which houses a Bethune museum on the hospital grounds. A special section is devoted to Bethune at the Military Museum of the Chinese People's Revolution directly south of the park.

In contrast to these sanctioned memorials, *Ding Ho/Group of 7* at the McMichael Canadian

Art Collection in Kleinburg, Ontario, offered a rare insight into the significance Bethune could have on a personal level, in this instance for a Chinese artist (Xiong, personal communication).<sup>4</sup> In 1986, Gu Xiong, who is now Professor of Fine Arts at the University of British Columbia, was a teacher of traditional woodcut printmaking at China's Sichuan Fine Arts Institute. He was invited to take part in an exchange program at the Banff Centre for the Arts, where he was encouraged to expand his work from making small prints into large-scale installation and performance art. Following this experience he began to experiment with painting, drawing, printmaking, sculpture, photography and video. In 1989, the year he left China, Xiong participated in the ground-breaking exhibition *China Avant-Garde* at the China National Museum of Fine Arts, which exhibited the works of 1,000 artists who were also exploring these art forms.

A collaboration between Xiong and curator Andrew Hunter, *Ding Ho/Group of 7* is unlike earlier commemorative projects in that the focus is on the stereotypical interpretations of each other's culture. Hunter's initial impression of China came from eating Chinese food at the Ding Ho restaurant in Hamilton, Ontario (Xiong and Hunter 2000). For Xiong, Canada was imagined through the heroism of Bethune and the paintings of the Group of Seven exhibited in China during the Cultural Revolution. Photographs of Xiong and Hunter as children and Xiong's sketches drawn while he was working in the countryside provide the introductory framework. This is followed by a second room that reveals Xiong's understanding of Canada through biographical objects associated with Bethune and Canadian landscape paintings. The third room contains Hunter's large scale collage with blown up pictures of dishes he enjoyed eating at Ding Ho and Chinese characters. The final section of the exhibition consists of some of Xiong's recent installation art as well as images indicative of his more in-depth knowledge of the history of the Chinese people in Canada, now that he is living in Vancouver. This includes workers mining gold in the Yukon, laying down the train tracks for the Canadian Pacific Railway and building Canada's Chinatowns.

The first gallery of the exhibition, under the heading "I lived in the mountain," contrasts the lives of Hunter in Canada and Xiong in China in the early 1970s. The title refers to the rural mountains where Xiong laboured as one of seventeen million educated youth sent to the countryside by Mao Zedong

during the Cultural Revolution. This was the period of political and cultural upheaval spearheaded by Mao, who as chairman of the Communist Party of China decided that the solution to the problem of liberal-bourgeois elements controlling the party was to eliminate those elements by reforming the thoughts and actions of China's youth. For four years Xiong worked in primitive conditions; at night he drew the people and objects around him by the light of a kerosene lantern to give him the emotional strength to persevere.

A second meaning of mountain refers to the mountains of Canada. Xiong writes:

During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1977), the whole nation was forced to read Chairman Mao's five essays. The most famous one was Remembering Doctor Norman Bethune ["In Memory of Norman Bethune" (1939)]. To me, Doctor Bethune was a great Canadian hero. In 1975, a selection of paintings by the Group of Seven was exhibited in China, the first foreign art to be accepted into the country by the communist government. The subject matter was Canadian landscapes. At the time Chinese art and culture were totally controlled by the revolutionary art theories of Marx, Lenin and Mao. Artists were forced to create works about soldiers, workers, peasants and political landscapes, and everyone had to use the same style. Art was no more than a political vehicle to spread propaganda and educate the nation. Western modern and contemporary art were considered bourgeois and rejected by the government.

When I heard the Group of Seven was showing at the National Gallery of China, I was very surprised. After seeing the printed images in magazines, I realized that because the paintings were landscapes without political messages, they were allowed to be shown. However, as an artist,

I discovered individual voices under the beautiful landscapes. The white, snowy mountains and the colourful autumn scenes, stood foremost in my mind. The white mountains stood out from the red Chinese political landscapes. The Group of Seven gave Chinese artists a very strong signal for individualism in art. This was my first impression of Canada. I dreamed to visit those white mountains.<sup>5</sup>

Several Group of Seven paintings that form part of the McMichael's permanent collections are surrounded by hundreds of small prints of heroes, workers and peasants produced by artists during the Cultural Revolution, as well as photographs of operas and plays from this era (Fig. 1). The prints recall Xiong's early work as an artist in China. Their placement amidst the Group of Seven paintings communicates the welcome interruption of the Canadian landscape paintings that suddenly and miraculously appeared during the Cultural Revolution in 1975, as described by Xiong. The photographs of operas and plays reference works produced by art and literature workers who, while being rigorously supervised in thought reform, were employed to create art propaganda for the Communist party (Andrews 1994: 344). During this time, propaganda pieces also consisted of portrait paintings and sculptures for the many shrines being built to honour Mao and those who were considered "revolutionary martyrs" like Bethune. The propaganda artists were "borrowed" from their work units and given sustenance for the duration of the project. Also during this period, official exhibitions on political themes were held at least once a year. These included historical paintings as well as portraits of current leaders and official heroes like Bethune.

In its formal juxtaposition of Canada and China, *Ding Ho/Group of 7* sets up a sharp contrast between Canadian landscapes and the small adjacent images, which are bursting with action. Here, Xiong has diametrically opposed the politically-charged imagery of the Chinese people during the Cultural Revolution (inspired by Soviet Socialist Realist art) with Canadian wilderness imagery promoted by the Group of Seven. Growing up in China, Xiong imagined Canada was represented by these stereotypical depictions of rugged, northern Canadian landscape. Like generations of Canadians, he was convinced that these carefully staged iconic images of sublime Canadian nature accurately identified Canada as a nation (Manning 2003: 2).

On a separate, much smaller wall sits a portrait of Bethune on loan from the Bethune Memorial House (Fig. 2). The portrait shows Bethune in a

**Fig. 1**  
Gu Xiong, Ding Ho/  
Group of 7 exhibition  
at the McMichael  
Canadian Art  
Collection.



beige jacket and grey turtleneck standing against a mottled green background that evokes the outdoors. His gaze fixed on a point in the distance, he appears as an inspiring figure compelled by a grand vision. The placement of the portrait in the exhibition space—at the far end of the room, the typical location for a sacred image—reflects the layout of a shrine, suggesting viewers should approach Bethune with mounting reverence. Enhancing the effect is a Red Army uniform displayed under glass that viewers pass as they make their way to the portrait. Since Bethune lost his life saving the lives of Red Army soldiers, these juxtapositions make allusions to his martyrdom.

A cabinet set up directly beneath Bethune's portrait holds Mao's essay "In Memory of Norman Bethune" as well as an audio recording of the text encased in the cabinet. Written shortly after Bethune's death in 1939, the text documents the doctor's final months in China. It is the same essay Xiong was forced to memorize, like all elementary school children in the country. Bethune received official recognition in China as a result of the essay, which urged all Communists to emulate Bethune's spirit of internationalism, his sense of responsibility and his devotion to others. For Xiong, Bethune is a hero because he had cared dearly about the Chinese people. But within the context of the exhibition, Bethune represents the freedom that Canada offered Xiong as an artist. In Xiong's imaginary construction, Bethune and the Group of Seven are linked as signifiers of Canadian nationalist ideals.

### ***Norman Bethune – Trail of Solidarity,* McCord Museum of Canadian History**

In 1936, Norman Bethune, along with 40,000 people from all over the world including 1,600 Canadians, responded to an invitation from the Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy to help with resistance efforts in the country when war broke out. Bethune arrived in early November 1936, in the midst of the siege of Madrid. As the head of the Canadian medical team, he soon realized that many of the wounded were dying from blood loss on the battlefield or on the trip from the front line to the hospital. Without transfusions in the field, even soldiers who made it to surgery were so weakened by loss of blood that they were often unable to survive.

Bethune conceived of the idea of administering blood transfusions on the spot in a mobile medical vehicle that would also contain dressings



**Fig. 2**  
Gu Xiong, Ding Ho/  
Group of 7 exhibition  
at the McMichael  
Canadian Art  
Collection.

for wounded soldiers and supplies and medicine for operations. To realize this idea he travelled to London and Paris to acquire equipment and supplies. It was in London that he met Hazen Sise, a Canadian architect and photographer, who said to him: "I wish I could go back with you."<sup>6</sup> When Bethune returned with Sise he created the Hispano-Canadian Transfusion Institute in Madrid, which he described as a "glorified milk delivery system" (Allan and Gordon 1998: 190). The system consisted of recruiting blood donors, developing ways to store the blood and designing a refrigerated van. Bethune's work in Spain became the model for the later development of Mobile Army Surgical Hospital (MASH) units.

The *Norman Bethune – La huella solidaria* exhibition was originally shown in Spain in 2004 at the Centro Andaluz de la Fotografía, Consejería de Cultura, Junta de Andalucía. The exhibition's creator was Jesus Majada, a literature professor with an interest in travel books about Spain who had learned of Bethune only twelve years prior (Majada, personal communication).<sup>7</sup> Reading the newspaper one day, Majada saw an article about a Canadian doctor who had written a book called *The Crime on the Road, Malaga-Almeria* (Bethune 1937). He finally found a copy in a library in Barcelona. This was during the time when war was raging in the former Yugoslavia. Upon opening the book Majada was overwhelmed—what he saw in its twenty-six black and white pictures was exactly what he was seeing on television every day.

Using pictures and text, *The Crime on the Road, Malaga-Almeria* documents the exodus from Málaga of more than 100,000 civilians who fled the city after it fell to Nationalist forces on February 7, 1937, seven months after the start of the Spanish Civil War. For eight days the refugees—mainly women, children and the elderly—pushed forward, despite being harassed, persecuted, machine-gunned, shelled by the infantry and bombarded from the air by airplanes and by ships situated less than 200 metres from the shoreline. Bethune and two members of his ambulance service, Sise and Thomas Worsley, witnessed the enormous scale of the tragedy. For three days and nights Bethune and his colleagues provided transportation to those who were unable to journey on foot. As Majada explains, these Canadians were the first to come to the aid of the refugees and disseminate news of the exodus. But although he had long known about the Caravana de la Muerte or March of Death, the most tragic and shameful episode of the entire Civil War, he had never heard of Bethune.

The people of Málaga were also unfamiliar with Bethune and his fellow Canadians, perhaps because journalists and historians had focused on the front-line soldiers as opposed to the people who had toiled behind the lines such as ambulance drivers, nurses and doctors (Preston 2006). Once Majada had seen a glimpse of the broader picture, he was determined to investigate further. In interviews with survivors he uncovered many traumatic memories. One person after another responded: “Yes, my father was there, he fled with the entire family”; “I was a child.... My uncle died on the road.... My mother survived only half of the way” (Majada, personal communication). For Majada, Sise’s photographs were precious because they constituted the only existing photographic documentation of the deplorable conditions the refugees faced during their escape. When the exhibition was shown in Spain in the spring of 2004, it was particularly poignant to see elderly visitors trying to find family members among the people in the pictures. The exhibition travelled across the country to Almería, Badajoz, Albacete and Salamanca before coming to the McCord Museum as *Norman Bethune – Trail of Solidarity*.

This exhibition is divided into three parts. The first is an overview of Bethune’s life in Canada, Spain and China; the second describes his work with the Canadian Transfusion Services; the third is made up of photographs by Sise originally published in *The Crime on the Road, Malaga-Almeria*, which

includes a text written by Bethune. The first two parts document Bethune through his professional associations. They consist of posed portraits from the 1930s in which Bethune is positioned alone: on the ship that took him to Spain, in front of the Medical Bureau to Aid Spanish Democracy and with a group of International Brigadists and with fellow workers at the Transfusion Unit. Conspicuously absent from these images are the people in Spain Bethune had come to help. Similarly, the pictures of Bethune taken in China by Sha Fei, although somewhat less posed than Sise’s portraits, seldom show him in action as a doctor.

Sise’s black and white pictures in the third part of the exhibition are strikingly dissimilar from those in parts one and two (Figs. 3, 4). Here, Bethune is no longer the subject in control of his surroundings; instead, he is an eyewitness, a man of action attempting to respond to an impossible situation. The balance of the photographs shows close-ups of dead bodies, orphaned children and exhausted refugees sitting by the side of road. In one we see the back of a girl who is covering her face with her hands. Looking at this photograph, Bethune remembered seeing a militiaman hoist the child onto his back. Sixty-seven years later at the exhibition in Spain, for Angeles Vazquez, who was fourteen in 1937, the picture brought to mind the memory of walking slowly, her feet covered in blisters, behind her parents and young brother, calling out to them and being terrified when no one responded (Majada, personal communication).

What Sise captured in photographs, Bethune later captured in words. His intention was to describe his impressions of the people as they trudged the coastal road, many of them barefoot with their feet grossly swollen, some dressed only in a single garment. Bethune writes:

The plain stretched into the distance as far as the eye could see, and across the plain, where the road should have been, there wriggled twenty miles of human beings, like a giant caterpillar, its many limbs raising a cloud of dust, moving, ponderously, stretching from beyond the horizon across the arid, flat country and up into the foothills. (1937: n.p.)

In Bethune’s eyewitness account, which was given to visitors of the McCord exhibition in a pamphlet along with comments by the survivors, the description of the sick and dying children conveys the atrocities and misery experienced by everyone on the march.

Children with bloodstained rags wrapped around their arms and legs, children without shoes, their



Fig. 3  
Norman Bethune –  
Trail of Solidarity – La  
huella solidaria at  
the McCord Museum  
of Canadian History  
2009.

feet swollen to twice their size crying helplessly from pain, hunger and fatigue.... Two kilometres of misery. Imagine four days and four nights, hiding by day in the hills as the fascist barbarians pursued them by plane. (Bethune 1937: n.p.)

Bethune also describes the anguish of making impossible decisions. “How could we choose between taking a child dying of dysentery or a mother silently watching us with great sunken eyes, carrying against her open breast her child born on the road two days ago?” (Bethune 1937: n.p.). He explains that many of the old people simply gave up hope and lay down by the side of the road, waiting to die.

Unlike the exhibitions in Spain, where Bethune’s words and survivors’ memories were placed next to the images, the photographs at the McCord exhibition stood alone. They were enlarged and mounted on white backing and set in simple frames. Unencumbered by Bethune’s text, visitors had the chance to make their own associations, some of which may have been affiliated with another time and place. With their strong composition and emphasis on physical and emotional proximity, Sise’s photographs represent a documentary mode of photographic practice that began in Spain during the Civil War (Brothers 1997: 1-5) and was made possible by the precision and shooting speed of the Leica camera, a small 35mm camera that could take thirty-six photographs before being reloaded. As such, they are capable of influencing viewers’ critical judgment of a world in which human

catastrophes and mayhem are all too common. His images of acute suffering and victimization due to war, displacement and famine are the same sort of images we see today that evoke in us outrage and indignation.

### **Biographical Objects in *Ding Ho/Group of 7* and *Norman Bethune – Trail of Solidarity***

*Ding Ho/Group of 7* and *Norman Bethune – Trail of Solidarity* are biographical exhibitions that explore the individual within a broader social context. In these presentations, Bethune is seen as a physician who interacts with, and creates a life from his attempts to help people. At the core of each exhibition is the intent to show the intersections of identity, belief, social and political activism and actual human experiences. Social history interweaves with the lives of individuals, including the lives of Xiong and Majada, creating layered depictions. With each exhibition there is Xiong and Majada’s understandings that their own experiences and values connect them as biographers to the ideas and events of Bethune’s life.

Both exhibitions place textual accounts about or by Bethune as their cornerstone: Xiong’s knowledge of the Canadian doctor originates in Mao’s “Red Book,” which includes the essay “In Memory of Norman Bethune” and *The Crime on the Road, Malaga-Almeria* initiates Majada’s exploration of

**Fig. 4**  
 Norman Bethune –  
 Trail of Solidarity – La  
 huella solidaria at  
 the McCord Museum  
 of Canadian History  
 2009.



Bethune's aid to the people of Málaga. These print objects are incorporated into the exhibitions as illustrative of Bethune's work and his world of ideas.

The print object in *Ding Ho/Group of 7* is Mao's carefully scripted text, which defines the significance the Communist leader bestowed on Bethune. Mao writes:

It is the spirit of internationalism, the spirit of communism, from which every Chinese Communist must learn.... Comrade Bethune's spirit, his utter devotion to others without any thought of self, was shown in his boundless sense of responsibility in his work, and his boundless warmheartedness towards all comrades and the people. Every Communist must learn from him.... We must learn the spirit of absolute selflessness from him. With this spirit everyone can be very useful to the people. A man's ability may be great or small, but if he has this spirit, he is already noble-minded and pure, a man of moral integrity and above vulgar interests, a man who is of value to the people. (Mao Zedong 1939: n.p.)

A line of tension runs through *Ding Ho/Group of 7* as Xiong dismantles the Communist ideas he acquired as a child. By positioning Group of Seven paintings in close proximity to Chinese prints, the surprise experienced by the artist when he saw the Group of Seven exhibit in China becomes the viewer's surprise. This juxtaposition succeeds in visually loosening up the impasses created by

subjectivity and politics, so that, as Hannah Arendt explains, common political reference points dissolve into a space that allows for self-analysis and the sharing of new stories that generate different links between the past and future. In fact, individuals who have political significance can never know what will become historically meaningful when their speech or actions are interpreted at a later time. Only retrospectively, Arendt emphasizes, in the narratives of biographers, can the reasons for outstanding contributions be revealed (1958: 184). This is true in the case of Bethune and Xiong. While the artist's function as a storyteller is to preserve the doings and sayings of Bethune, his principal interest is to weave a story that illustrates how these doings and sayings influenced his own life.

In *Ding Ho/Group of 7* and *Norman Bethune – Trail of Solidarity*, the text and photographs are more than the external proof, relic or illustration that amplifies the life of Bethune. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault explains that difficulties arise when one looks at “the material individualization of the book”:

The frontiers of a book are never clear-cut: beyond the title, the first lines, and the last full stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network.... The book is not simply the object that one holds in one's hands; and it



cannot remain within the little parallelepiped that contains it: its unity is variable and relative. (2002: 25)

With this in mind, we see that *The Crime on the Road, Malaga-Almeria* interacts in a “system of references.” This object is also a text in the sense of being a cohesive unit with physical features that convey meaning about the world in which it was created. In essence, it constitutes a network of relations that transforms the coherence of the book. This is also the case with the “Red Book” in *Ding Ho/Group of 7* in its interaction with the paintings, prints and portraits that constitute the other objects in the exhibition. Especially significant in this regard is the connection between Mao’s text and recording of “In Memory of Dr. Norman Bethune” and the portrait of Bethune hanging just above. According to Foucault, this is a new relation that puts the meaning of the book in suspense by introducing a different aspect of its meaning (2002: 159).

What transforms “In Memory of Dr. Norman Bethune” from a political statement “about a man who is of value to the people” (Mao Zedong 1939: n.p.) into a meaningful text in the exhibition is Xiong’s understanding that Bethune is a Canadian hero. Mao describes Bethune’s Canadian identity: “Comrade Norman Bethune, a member of the Communist Party of Canada, was around fifty when he was sent by the Communist Parties of Canada and the United States to China; he made light of travelling thousands of miles to help us in our War of Resistance Against Japan” (ibid.). In choosing a distinctive portrait as the centrepiece of the exhibition, Xiong amplifies this crucial part of Bethune’s story.

There were many other portraits made of Bethune during the Cultural Revolution that Xiong could have selected for the exhibition. For example, Bethune appears in woodcuts in a style reminiscent of brightly coloured Chinese folk prints, as well as in a poster called “Time is Money,” where he is riding a galloping horse. In an image created by the Salt City Peasants, Workers and Soldier Cultural Revolution Committee, Bethune floats in the sky while his memory lives on in the minds of the workers—all of whom are carrying Mao’s “Red Book”—marching below.<sup>8</sup> In a block print titled “Raise Mao’s Theory Highly and Raise the Greatest Red Flag,” a Chinese Communist military leader named Lin Biao is also holding Mao’s book, and below are the words: “Serve the People, In memory of Bai Qui En [the name Bethune was given in China]. Yu Gong can move the Mountain.” The proverb

means that everything can be accomplished, even the most difficult task, if one advances a step at a time (Allan and Gordon: 1989). Or Xiong could easily have chosen a frequently reproduced painting of Bethune performing surgery in a makeshift hospital in the most rudimentary of conditions in the Shanxi-Hobei border region of China where the fighting was fierce (Allan and Gordon 1989).

Instead, Xiong preferred a Bethune portrait created in China that is very “Canadian” in its conception. Bethune has a beard, unlike Mao and other Chinese Communist leaders who were always shown clean-shaven. His clothing—a close-fitting turtleneck sweater and hip-length unzipped jacket—is decidedly Western. His demeanor evokes a rugged rural environment in China, but because the background is devoid of scenic references he could just as well be in Canada standing in one of the wilderness scenes depicted by the Group of Seven.

Biographers use portraits to convey persona, both physical and psychological. The portrait as a biographical object, however, is illusory and synthetic. Although its mimetic qualities may exist to a greater or lesser degree, also present are the perceptions shared by the portrait artist and viewer, in addition to the conventions of style, genre, taste and fashion contained in the portrait. In *Ding Ho/Group of 7* the Western artistic depiction of Bethune and the details captured in the portrait act as a narrative force that represents a moment when Bethune is at his most “Canadian.” Furthermore, in what Foucault calls a “node within a network” (2002: 25), the size of the portrait connects the picture to the large and vibrant Group of Seven canvases rather than the small Chinese monochrome prints.

Xiong’s association with Canada and Canadian landscape art does not mean he abandoned the Chinese elements of Bethune’s story that are so key to his regard for the man. The portrait’s object biography is significant in this regard: it was a gift presented to Bethune Memorial House by a delegation of Chinese diplomats and officials (Scott Davidson, personal communication).<sup>9</sup> Unquestionably, Xiong admired Bethune because he came to the assistance of the Chinese people. This admiration, along with his desire to recognize Bethune’s Canadian origins, is in step with the feelings of numerous visitors from China who have flocked to the Bethune Memorial House National Historic Site. Although Sise encouraged the Canadian government to purchase Bethune’s birthplace and turn it into a “national shrine” (April 1972), the government already felt considerable

pressure from the continuous stream of Chinese travellers to Gravenhurst, who wished to venerate Bethune at his birthplace long before the museum was opened.

Objects representing Bethune in the exhibit—the portrait, the book, the recording and the uniform—tell the story of Bethune in China. In addition, they are symbolic of what Arendt describes as a person's willingness to become a political actor. According to Arendt, interdependence—the reliance of people on others—structures freedom as a radically political concept (1968: 237, 242). As such, Bethune's motivation to assist the Chinese people is the "freedom" that "exists only in the unique intermediary space of politics" (Arendt 2005: 95).

A complication exists in Xiong's biographical narrative, arising from the juxtaposition of two different understandings of freedom. While Xiong greatly admires Bethune's freedom in the political sphere of China, which is Arendt's definition of freedom, his own freedom is found in his vision of Canada. As Xiong sees it, this is freedom as independence: deliverance from having to produce the state propaganda required by the Cultural Revolution. In terms of Xiong's identity as an artist, this is not the freedom Arendt advocates, but the freedom espoused by Foucault, who emphasized the need to move from an emancipatory to a creative ideal of freedom (Oksala 2005: 168). For Foucault, freedom interweaves the individual body, personal ethics and creative language, and is capable of generating avant-garde modes of artistic expression, new possibilities and alternative ontological realms.

Although Foucault and Arendt may disagree on the meaning of freedom, both share, despite differences in their analyses, a belief that totalitarian power—the subject of Sise's photographs—leads to the blurring of the line between life and death. Arendt's aim to explain the characteristics of political being-in-the-world as a distinct mode of human experience is a response to the political evil of totalitarianism, which is built on terror and ideological fiction (1973: 460-65). Within this context the landed aristocracy, the Catholic Church, a large military clique, the monarchists and the fascist party Falange constituted a totalitarian force. This alliance of established sources of power was intent on killing the people of Málaga because it was a Republican stronghold. The justification was the supposed laws of history that privileged the traditional structure of Spanish society. Following Foucault's analysis, this is an example of biopower,

the power of a group to manage, control and subjugate entire populations, and eradicate with impunity people who threaten its existence (Foucault 1984: 263; Nealon 2007: 46).

## Conclusion and Suggestions for Further Research

Bethune's life has intersected public history, leading to his association with diverse values, meanings and appeals. Crucial in this regard are the people and events responsible for defining his memory. Various experiences identify the man, such as his battle with tuberculosis as a patient and a doctor, his contributions as a poet and artist, his recognition as an inventive thoracic surgeon, and his service to the wounded on the battlefields of Spain and China.

Over the years, as scholars and other interested parties who have studied Bethune have changed, so too have the perspectives from which his life and work have been defined. With his new popularity, Bethune has become a symbolic code that serves various objectives and holds numerous assumptions. In *Norman Bethune – Trail of Solidarity*, Majada encourages viewers to remember both the biography of Bethune and the biographies of the Málaga people whose traces survive in Sise's photographs. His is a biographical project that not only focuses on Bethune as a person but on group solidarities, the experience of ordinary citizens, social history and issues of domination and oppression. While Xiong's approach, on the other hand, is autobiographical and self-reflective, both exhibitions share in the concept that biography is larger than the individual and rooted in the interactions of ideas and events.

In recent years, the memory of Bethune has been used to cement numerous official agreements between Canada and China, and to commemorate the connection between them. The year 2008, for example, was chosen by Montreal officials to mark the 80th anniversary of Bethune's arrival in the city and the 70th anniversary of his departure for China. As part of the commemoration activities, the FOFA Gallery at Concordia University mounted in its window the exhibition *Crossing Cultures: Images of Norman Bethune in China*. On display were journalistic photographs by Sha Fe and two busts that had been specially commissioned by the People's Republic of China. As such, the exhibition conveyed the heroic admiration people in China have felt for Bethune from his arrival in 1938 until the present. This reverence is particularly revealing

in a photograph of artists in a sculpture factory gathered around a small scale statue of Bethune. Significantly absent from the items delivered by the Chinese consulate—although they had been requested by the exhibition’s curator, Catherine MacKenzie—were posters of Bethune produced during the Cultural Revolution. MacKenzie used her own resources to procure them. Their original omission is perhaps due to the fact that it is problematic for today’s Chinese government to associate Bethune with Mao’s revolution and the Great Leap Forward, since the power struggles and political instability that dominated that era and caused the tremendous suffering of Gu Xiong’s generation are now considered an unfortunate part of China’s modern history.

Meanwhile, in Spain and China, Bethune has remained a person of historical significance. In Spain, Majada has been instrumental in keeping Bethune’s memory alive through memorial plaques and commemorative activities. On February 7, 2006, the City of Málaga inaugurated the Walk of Canadians as a tribute to Bethune and his colleagues. At the ceremony, a plaque was unveiled with the inscription: “Walk of Canadians - In memory of aid from the people of Canada, at the hands of Norman Bethune, provided to the fugitives of Málaga in February 1937.” An olive tree and a maple tree, representative of Spain and Canada,

were also planted as symbols of friendship between the people of these two countries. In China, many tourists and Chinese citizens continue to visit Bethune’s memorial sites. The most recent public attention was in 2006 when a twenty-part television series on Bethune was broadcast on China Central Television in an attempt to renew a “socialist sense of honour and shame” in a country where ideology has been in decline.<sup>10</sup>

To evoke Bethune’s life requires a broad and extensive research strategy. This includes uncovering the many biographical objects that tell stories about Bethune’s life as well as their own stories: at the same time that the objects render proof of Bethune’s singularity, they also generate narratives that manifest varied relationships, beliefs and interactions. In furthering the study of these objects we can learn how things are given biographical significance and operate as vehicles for identity, knowledge and action. This paper explored the biographical objects associated with Bethune in two exhibitions in conjunction with the philosophical writings of Foucault and Hannah Arendt. Other approaches about identity and representation that probe the boundaries of biography and biographical objects can contribute to a better understanding of the historical representations of subjectivity, and the experiences and the meanings of shared lives and collective memories.

## Notes

1. This endorsement coincided with Canada’s official recognition of the Communist People’s Republic of China in 1970. In 1972, the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada recommended Dr. Norman Bethune as a person of “national historic significance” (Russell 1996).
2. See [http://www.dianefarrisgallery.com/artist/xiong/ding\\_ho.htm](http://www.dianefarrisgallery.com/artist/xiong/ding_ho.htm) (accessed May 29, 2010).
3. Or “the cultural biography of objects” (Gosden and Marshall 1999).
4. My communication with Xiong occurred on March 19, 21 and 22, 2009, and on June 3, 2009.
5. Passage taken from the Diane Farris Gallery website at [http://www.dianefarrisgallery.com/artist/xiong/ding\\_ho.htm](http://www.dianefarrisgallery.com/artist/xiong/ding_ho.htm) (accessed May 29, 2010).
6. See Hazen Sise February 1, 1974 interview with Charles C. Hill from which all Sise information noted here comes. It can be found at <http://cybermuseum.ca/cybermuseum/servlet/imageserver?src=DO918-1000&ext=x.pdf> (accessed May 29, 2010).
7. Communication with Majada is from email correspondence dated January 27, 2009. I also heard his talk at an October 18, 2008 symposium, entitled “Norman Bethune and Visual Culture(s): a Symposium” at the McCord Museum in Montreal.
8. The “Red Book” also includes the essay “In Memory of Norman Bethune.” The official name of the “Red Book” is *The Quotes of Chairman Mao*, notwithstanding that it is generally referred to as the “Red Book.” This book, edited by Lin Biao, was used during the Chinese Cultural Revolution by the Red Guard, which created the cult of Mao.
9. My communication with Davidson occurred on October 28 and 29, 2008; April 2, 8, 22 and 25, 2009.
10. See Chinese TV to Broadcast Bethune Miniseries. CBC Arts. July 27, 2006. <http://www.cbc.ca/arts/story/2006/07/27/bethune-miniseries-china.html> (accessed May 29, 2010).

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