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978-1-107-08439-1 - Visual Culture in Contemporary China: Paradigms and Shifts

Xiaobing Tang

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## VISUAL CULTURE IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA

Exploring a wealth of images ranging from woodblock prints to oil paintings, this beautifully illustrated full-color study takes up key elements of the visual culture produced in the People's Republic of China from its founding in 1949 to the present day. In a challenge to prevailing perceptions, Xiaobing Tang argues that contemporary Chinese visual culture is too complex to be understood in terms of a simple binary of government propaganda and dissident art, and that new ways must be sought to explain as well as appreciate its multiple sources and enduring visions. Drawing on rich artistic, literary, and sociopolitical backgrounds, Tang presents a series of insightful readings of paradigmatic works in contemporary Chinese visual arts and cinema. Lucidly written and organized to address provocative questions, this compelling study underscores the global and historical context of Chinese visual culture and offers a timely new perspective on our understanding of China today.

XIAOBING TANG is Helmut F. Stern Professor of Modern Chinese Studies and Professor of Comparative Literature at the University of Michigan, and author of *Origins of the Chinese Avant-Garde*.

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## *Acknowledgments*

The initial impetus for this book may be traced back to the introductory courses on modern Chinese literature and culture that I taught when I was first an assistant professor at the University of Colorado, Boulder, in the early 1990s. I remember having slides made from the recently published *China's New Art, Post-1989* and trying to make sense of artwork from that volume to my students – and myself – by showing posters from an earlier era. Over the past twenty-some years, I have offered related courses at several universities, but the range of visual images I have presented has kept expanding. I want to take this opportunity to thank the many students who have shared my interest, made insightful comments, and stimulated my thinking. If by any chance some of you come across this book and flip through it, I hope you will be able to relate to what you find here.

This volume results from research and teaching over many years, during which time we have all witnessed the dramatic changes that have reshaped China and brought forth new issues and experiences. The writing of this book therefore reflects shifts in my own perspectives too, and it records my efforts to understand the complex meaning of a fast-changing China on the one hand, and to convey that understanding to my students and the general public on the other. I am fully aware that my efforts have received support from many individuals and various institutions. Without such support, this book project would not have gone very far.

In 2007, with funding from the American Council of Learned Societies, I organized an international conference on “Scenes and Visions: Approaches to Modern Chinese Visual Culture” at the University of Southern California. This was when the idea for this book first took root in my mind. Then, in October 2013, I organized another international and similarly multidisciplinary conference at the University of Michigan to reconsider socialist culture in twentieth-century China. This second conference received generous financial and staff support from the Center for Chinese Studies on campus. On both occasions, I gave presentations that eventually grew into chapters in the current volume, but it was the work of participating scholars and our shared research interests that I found most inspiring.

*Acknowledgments*

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I drafted most of the chapters for the book in the 2011–12 academic year, when I was a fellow at the University of Michigan Institute for the Humanities. It was a productive year, and I enjoyed conversations with Daniel Herwitz, Artemis Leontis, David Porter, Matthew Lassiter, Joan Kee, Daniel Hack, and other colleagues at the institute. I owe a debt of gratitude to Donald Lopez and Yopie Prins who, as department chairs, endorsed my application for the fellowship to begin with.

Over the years, I have presented different stages of my research on contemporary Chinese visual culture at a number of institutions. One of the earliest occasions was a public lecture that I gave at the Fort Wayne Museum of Art in Indiana in 1996, when the touring exhibition of *China's New Art, Post-1989* opened there. Between 2007 and 2013, I had the pleasure of visiting and speaking at Stanford University, the University of Minnesota, Harvard University, Emory University, the National Museum of Korea, the University of California in Berkeley, Indiana University, the University of York in the UK, the Shenzhen Museum of Art, and Peking University in China. Presentations during these visits allowed me to interact with different audiences and clarify my ideas. I thank all the colleagues and institutions that invited me and offered me these opportunities.

More specifically, I express my thankfulness to the following individuals for their support, engagement with my work, and various other forms of assistance: Ban Wang and Jean Ma at Stanford; Li Yang, Yao Daimei, Wang Huangsheng, Yin Shuangxi, Wang Guangyi, Chen Qi, and Wang Mingxian in Beijing; Johnson Tsong-Zung Chang in Hong Kong; Liu Qingyuan, Cai Tao, and Li Gongming in Guangzhou; Gao Shiming, Fang Limin, Lü Peng, and Zhang Yuanfan in Hangzhou; He Kun and Li Chuankang in Yunnan; Jie Li at Harvard; Wang Zheng, Philip Hallman, Alan Young, Robert Demilner, Liangyu Fu, Katie Dimmery, and Angie Baecker at the University of Michigan; Stanley Rosen at the University of Southern California; Hannah Kendal and He Weimin at Oxford University; and Marien van der Heijden in Amsterdam.

I am both honored and delighted that Cambridge University Press is the publisher. I am most grateful to Lucy Rhymer for her enthusiasm from the very beginning. As commissioning editor, she recognized the relevance of my work and oversaw the project with a clear vision and professional rigor. The four readers for Cambridge University Press offered insightful comments and helped me make the manuscript much stronger. I appreciate their ringing endorsements, and I hope they will find the published version meets their expectations. I alone, however, remain responsible for my arguments as well as all possible errors in the following pages.

Working with the editorial staff at Cambridge University Press was a pleasant as well as a reassuring experience. I thank Amanda George and Beáta Makó in particular for guiding me through the production of the book.

The arduous process of seeking permission to reproduce images as illustrations was greatly facilitated by the Contemporary Art and Social Thought Research Institute at the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou, the Hunan Fine Arts Press, and the Central Academy of Fine Arts Museum of Art. I thank Liu Xiao in Hangzhou, Luo Biao in Changsha, and Liu Xiyan and Yang Linyu in Beijing for their dedicated assistance. I also thank all the artists who readily gave me permission to use their work for free in this publication.

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Chapter 3 is based on my essay “Rural Women and New China Cinema: From *Li Shuangshuang* to *Ermo*,” first published by Duke University Press in *positions: east asia cultures critique* (vol. 11, no. 3: 647–74) in 2003 and included here with permission from Duke University Press. I have updated and revised the essay for its appearance in the present study.

A small portion of Chapter 5 appeared in a less-developed form as “Why Should 2009 Make a Difference? Reflections on a Chinese Blockbuster” in late 2009 in *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, an online resource center edited by Kirk Denton and based at the Ohio State University. Jason McGrath offered helpful comments on that earlier iteration. I thank both of them for their input.

My sister Xiaoyan in China is always ready to help when I need to find sources or get in touch with people there. I simply cannot thank her enough for all she has done for me.

In 2007, I dedicated my book on the modern woodcut movement to Katia and Kolia, my two little fellow travelers. In a few short years, Katia will be going to college. I hope both Katia and Kolia will have the option of taking a course on modern or contemporary Chinese visual culture in college. It should be an eye-opening experience.

Finally, like my other endeavors, this book would not have been possible without Liza’s love and support.



*A brief timeline of relevant events*

- 1911 The Wuchang Uprising in central China in October leads to the fall of the Qing dynasty (1644–1912) and the establishment of the Republic of China (ROC) in 1912.
- 1919 The May 4 student protest movement, first in Beijing and then in other cities, provides momentum to the nascent New Culture Movement.
- 1927 The political alliance between the Nationalists (KMT) and the Communists (CCP) breaks down as their joint military campaign reaches the Yangtze Delta after defeating regional warlords.  
The Nationalist government of the ROC establishes itself in Nanjing, and the center of the nation's cultural and economic life shifts toward the Shanghai–Nanjing corridor.
- 1929 The First National Fine Arts Exhibition, organized by the Ministry of Education of the ROC, takes place in Shanghai.
- 1937 Japan begins its comprehensive invasion of China, an event arguably marking the beginning of World War II. With the fall of Nanjing in December, the Nationalist “Nanjing Decade” comes to an end.
- 1942 In rural northwest China, where the Communists have established their military and political bases, Mao Zedong delivers a series of talks at the Yan'an forum on literature and art, laying out the guidelines for developing a new culture for the nation.
- 1945 In Chongqing, the wartime capital of China, the Nationalist government accepts Japan's surrender in September. Soon afterwards, military clashes between the Communists and the Nationalists escalate into a full-blown civil war.
- 1949 Following decisive victories over Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist army and with the ROC government withdrawn to Taiwan, Mao Zedong declares the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) on October 1.  
In July, an All-China Congress of Literary and Art Workers convenes in Beijing. An art exhibition is held during the congress

*A brief timeline of relevant events*

and will be retroactively named the First Fine Arts Exhibition of the PRC.

- 1950 The New Marriage Law, the first legal document of the PRC, is promulgated in April.

The Land Reform Law is promulgated in June and systematic land reform begins in the country.

The Korean War breaks out and China dispatches a Volunteer Army in support of North Korea in October.

- 1953 The first Five-Year Plan for industrialization and economic development is set in motion.

An international armistice brings the Korean War to an end in July.

The second All-China Congress of Literary and Art Workers takes place in September.

- 1958 The ambitious Great Leap Forward movement, for the stated purpose of achieving industrialization and increasing agricultural production through collectivization, begins and ends two years later with disastrous consequences.

Construction of the “Ten Great Buildings” begins in Beijing. Most of these monumental public buildings, best known of them being the Great Hall of the People, are completed by October 1, 1959, in order to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the PRC.

- 1960 The growing ideological divergence between the Communist Parties of the Soviet Union and China is publicized, culminating in military confrontations between the two countries in 1969.

- 1962 Mao Zedong calls for systematic socialist education in the country and emphasizes the continuation of class struggle under socialism.

*Li Shuangshuang* is released and by popular vote wins the 1963 Hundred Flowers Award for Best Feature Film.

- 1966 The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution is launched.

From August to November, Mao Zedong greets and reviews over 13 million Red Guards traveling to Beijing from across the country.

- 1968 In Paris, student protests on university campuses and massive general strikes, in part inspired by the Chinese Cultural Revolution, take place in May.

Many countries around the world, from Canada to Japan, witness radical student activism in pursuit of different causes.

In China, with the education system practically shut down, a national campaign to send millions of high-school students from the city to the countryside for further education gets under way.

*A brief timeline of relevant events*

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- 1971 As the Cultural Revolution enters its less turbulent phase, the PRC is admitted to the United Nations, replacing the ROC as the government representing China. In the following year, Japan and many Western countries, such as Great Britain, West Germany, Canada, and Australia, formally recognize the PRC.
- 1974 An exhibition of Huxian peasant painting begins a tour of several European countries.  
In October, a national fine arts exhibition opens in Beijing in celebration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the PRC.
- 1976 Mao Zedong dies in September. Within a month, his wife Jiang Qing and a group of Cultural Revolution radicals are arrested.  
A year later, the CCP announces the conclusion of the Cultural Revolution at its eleventh national congress.
- 1979 The United States establishes diplomatic relationship with the PRC on January 1. A few weeks later, Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping becomes the first leader of the PRC to visit the United States.  
The era of reforms and opening-up begins.  
China Central Television (CCTV) starts broadcasting an entertainment program on the eve of the lunar New Year (Spring Festival).
- 1985 A modernist New Wave, embraced by young students of art, sweeps across many art academies and universities.  
The year before, *Yellow Earth*, directed by Chen Kaige, announced the arrival of the Fifth Generation of filmmakers.  
A group of writers belonging to the generation that was sent out to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution calls for a “seeking of cultural roots” through literature.
- 1989 A student-led protest movement in Tiananmen Square draws popular support and global media attention. The government declares martial law in Beijing in May, and brings in the military to clear demonstrators from the square on June 4.  
The Soviet bloc begins to unravel, first in Poland and then across Eastern Europe.  
In February, *China/Avant-Garde*, also known as the *China Modern Art Exhibition*, opens at the China Art Gallery in Beijing. In July, the Seventh National Fine Arts Exhibition takes place as scheduled.
- 1992 In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, Deng Xiaoping, in his late eighties, visits the southern city of Shenzhen and calls for more comprehensive economic reforms and development.

*A brief timeline of relevant events*

- 1993 The exhibition *China's New Art, Post-1989* opens in Hong Kong. Over the next five years, portions of the exhibition travel to many cities in Australia, Canada, and the US, introducing to Western viewers new categories of contemporary Chinese art, such as Political Pop and Cynical Realism.
- 2001 On September 11, terrorist attacks take place in New York City and Washington, DC.  
In December, China officially joins the World Trade Organization, sixteen years after the country first expressed interest in becoming a member.
- 2008 Beijing hosts the Summer Olympics.
- 2009 Celebrations of the sixtieth anniversary of the PRC include the film *The Founding of a Republic*, a major box office hit.
- 2010 China becomes the second-largest economy in the world, after becoming the world's largest automobile market the year before.  
For the first time China's urban population outnumbers its rural population. According to a UN agency, China's urban population increased from 64 million in 1950 to 636 million.  
The number of Chinese internet users reaches 420 million.
- 2012 The European Fine Art Foundation reports that in the previous year China overtook the US as the world's largest market for art and antiques.  
Over 450 new art museums open this year, pushing the total number of museums in the country to 3,866, compared to 25 in 1949.
- 2013 China adds 5,077 cinema screens in 903 new cineplexes, bringing the total number of screens to 18,195. According to the online magazine *Variety*, industry experts suggest that China will be adequately screened when it has 35,000 to 40,000 cinema screens.  
The total number of cellphone users in China surpasses 1 billion.  
China experiences the worst air pollution in history. The State Council issues a comprehensive plan of action in September, vowing to improve air quality measurably by 2017.