

## A Corrective History of Chinese Urban Cinema

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**This study of the role of moving images within the discourse on urban planning is a reflection on the effects of the visual culture of Chinese cities on policy and development. It demonstrates a more sophisticated use and broader vision of mass media than Chinese Party officials are usually granted.**

Reviewed: Yomi Braester, *Painting the City Red: Chinese Cinema and the Urban Contract*, Duke University Press, 2010, 405 p.

The past year in Chinese cultural studies has seen some truly innovative and interdisciplinary approaches that should not be confined to the shelves of East Asian specialists. Along with Sheldon Lu and Jiayan Mi's *Chinese Ecocinema: In the Age of Environmental Challenge* and Robin Visser's *Cities Surround the Countryside: Urban Aesthetics in Postsocialist China*, Yomi Braester's most recent book, *Painting the City Red: Chinese Cinema and the Urban Contract*, reflects a concern with culture's ability not just to influence our perceptions of the world or even human behavior, but also to shape the space in which we live. Beginning in 1949 and moving forward to the 2008 Olympics, Braester pivots between the metropolises of Beijing, Shanghai and Taipei, employing Bakhtin's notion of "chronotopes", or "the imaginary place and time frames that forge fictional realms" (p. 18) to structure his examination of how new urban images and spatial practices in hundreds of visual texts help negotiate the relationship between developers and residents. The result is a sweeping and innovative survey of urban representation that, while leaving certain key aspects wanting, rightfully reshapes the conceptual map of modern Chinese culture.

Art and politics in China were deeply intertwined well before the establishment of the People's Republic of China, and even the formation of the Communist Party. The potential power of the arts to define the state and influence the masses was recognized and promoted by no less than the Qing revolutionary Liang Qichao and the literary giant Lu Xun. The Japanese Occupation in the 1930s and 1940s further convinced intellectuals and artists of the need of their works to serve the nation. So after the Communists came to power, it was no surprise that the arts were organized and mobilized in the project of building a socialist state. Unlike the wealth of research on the earlier periods, the body of work from that era has been woefully neglected, dismissed abroad for heavy-handed propaganda while tarnished during the Cultural Revolution domestically.

In the past decade, a number of scholars such as Ban Wang, Kirk Denton, Tang Xiaobing and Peter Button have helped to call attention to the cultural impact of the Maoist period, providing entry points that carefully and thoughtfully engage with the web of politics underlying Maoist works. Meanwhile, other scholars turned towards Shanghai to uncover a cosmopolitan past, rehabilitating works condemned or merely forgotten in the Mao era. Just as old films from the Shanghai film industry were being reintroduced, a new generation of filmmakers like Zhang Yuan, Lou Ye and Jia Zhangke turned their lens on the contemporary urban life. Not surprisingly a number of linkages were found between the two eras, not just in context (rapid development, urbanization, internal migration) but also in imagery and style (montage, documentary footage). Yet the works of the interim decades factored little into these comparative analyses.

### **Artists as Mediators**

Braester's project, what he calls "a corrective history of Chinese urban cinema" (p. 8), fills in the gaps in both the narrative of Chinese arts and urban life with an impressive collection of overlooked productions made during the early years of the PRC. Though *Painting the City Red's* tagline places cinema at its forefront, the source material included can best be broadly described as moving images. Drama, film (both fiction and documentary), installation art and eventually new media are all examined. On the theoretical level, their inclusion adds an artistic component to Manuel Castellas and Jordi

Borja's conception to the "urban contract." In this way, visual culture was not just used in defining a revolutionary historical narrative or delineating class distinctions, it was also concerned with the less ideological aspects of power and governance such as city planning. Therefore, artistic production was not just a reaction to urban change, but rather served as a mediator in the negotiations between urban developers and residents. In our case, directors are presented as reluctant mouthpieces for official power in the Mao era while during the period of reform and in Taiwan, the artists take oppositional stance before adopting the role of cultural brokers with the influx of global capital. On the surface none of Braester's positioning of the texts and their creators are terribly surprising and the result of his explorations may do little to challenge the binary of artistic collaboration or resistance. However, the significance of his analysis lies in his construction of a clear genealogy of both style and purpose that links these contradictory postures and in his uncovering of a discourse usually subsumed by larger and more abstract questions of nationhood and identity.

The use of the term "mediators" may give many readers pause, but Braester does eventually recognize the limited agency of arts in the PRC as he makes clear on page 268, "Films and other visual documentation of urban development have never been given the stage necessary to change current policies." This statement encapsulates the major challenge of the study, a challenge that deserves a more explicit presence in his narrative.

The beginning section of the monograph (chapters one through three) examines works created within the apparatus of the state, bookending the conscious reshaping of Shanghai's image for a socialist nation with drama productions, most notably Lao She's *Dragon Whisker Creek*, by Beijing People's Art Theater (BPAT) crucial in making the case for rebuilding efforts in the capital. Braester examines how they communicate urban policy through artistic means and thus create new visions of urban space. In these chapters, the reader develops a clear sense of a deep relationship between BPAT and officials. The analysis does not, and from the evidence seemingly cannot, challenge the position of the arts as a reluctant mouthpiece for party policy, but it does demonstrate a

more sophisticated use and broader vision of mass media than Party officials are usually granted and also shows how directors used the limited agency they did have.

### **The Emergence of “Post-Cinematic” Space**

As the book moves away from drama and further a field in the Reform era, a more dynamic picture emerges. The book’s fourth chapter on the shift in symbolism in the depiction of Tiananmen Square and its integration into daily life marks a fundamental change in the role of moving images within the discourse on urban planning. From there, Braester moves to Taiwan to chronicle the representation of the destruction of the veteran villages. Traveling back to the Mainland with these positions in mind, chapter six traces the rise of a “documentary impulse” in both commercial and independent filmmaking of post-Fifth Generation filmmakers. In both the PRC and the Taiwanese cases, media that first was employed as a way of preparing residents for change became a means of coping with change that happens before they even know it. The final chapter presents the monograph’s most evocative and extendable chronotope. Engaging with trends and theories in architecture and urban planning, it links the “post-spatial” trends in architecture and urban planning to the emergence of “the post-cinematic” space.

For China specialists, Braester’s fresh take encourages a reassessment of how we trace the development of artistic trends across eras and state borders while also broadening our consideration of the political implications of cinema beyond the larger ideological questions. The parallels he draws between the depictions of destruction of the veterans villages in Taiwan with that of the *hutongs* (narrow alleys) and compounds in Beijing is just one of example of many that do not deserve to be overlooked. Furthermore, the conceptualization of urban space should and could also be examined in other media, such as fiction, music, journalism and most importantly, television and the Internet, which have eclipsed film and drama in accessibility and interaction among Chinese consumers. While eschewing a comparative approach, scholars of other regions as well as the general reader are certain to find many concepts that can be applied beyond the specific geographical and temporal boundaries of the monograph. China’s foray into urban planning is just one part of the larger narrative of the breakdown and

transformation of state control and the rise of global capital in the many post-Socialist states as well as the evolving relationship between urban societies and media worldwide.

*Painting the City Red* does leave some areas open to criticism. In making a case for his post-49 genealogy, Braester might have missed some small but significant connections to earlier films. Films such as the 1947 *Myriad of Lights* (not to be confused with the BPAT play Braester profiles) and *Spring River Flows East* did indeed make use of exterior shots and documentary footage and did not limit their iconography of the city as a dazzling spectacle (p. 64). For evidence of the trope of revolutionary marches which Braester considers a “new spectacle” (p. 70), one needs look no further than the oft-cited 1934 classic *New Women*. It would have strengthened his argument to explore these connections.

Finally, although acknowledged to be beyond the scope of this project, the question of readership is important to understanding the impact of the texts Braester profiles. It is unfortunate that this question is largely left unexamined. Most problematic is the failure to address the steady decline of domestic film spectatorship in the 1980s and 1990s as well as the lack of accessibility to independent films both in Mainland China and in Taiwan. But otherwise, this is more of a challenge for future research than a flaw in what has been done so far. The readership of an urban text is certainly not limited to the residents of the city which they depict or even where they are presented. How does the visual culture of places like Shanghai, Beijing and Taipei shape how non-residents approach them, both conceptually and physically, and what effect does this have on policy and development? Even more broadly, how do visions of other spaces like these change the way spectators conceptualize and even transform their own surroundings? The questions that *Painting the City Red* provokes are nearly as exciting as the conclusions it draws.

**Films referenced:**

*Spring River Flows East (Yi Jiang Chun Shui Xiang Dong Liu)*. Directed by Cai Chusheng. Shanghai: Kunlun, 1947. Beijing: Zhongguo Wen Cai Sheng Xiang Chubanshe, 2005. DVD.

*Myriad of Lights (Wan Jia Denghuo)*. Directed by Shen Fu. Shanghai: Kunlun, 1947. Los Angeles: Cinema Epoch, 2008. DVD.

*New Women (Xin Nuxing)*. Directed by Cai Chusheng. Shanghai: Lianhua, 1935. Guangzhou: Qi Luyin Xiang Chubanshe, 2006. DVD.

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