

time emerges as a productive dimension of the human experience of the world, rather than a speculative faith or divine promise. This sense of time is encoded in Chinese artistic concepts and forms, where the human element suffuses the focus, without being its centre.

The next chapters explore the Daoist-Confucian synthesis, beauty in deep emotion (Wei-Jin thought), metaphysics (Chan Buddhism) and, finally, the approach to modernity. Li is concerned to show that succeeding strains of thought contributed to the concretization of Confucian-based aesthetics, without ever displacing the centrality of its concern with interpersonal ethics. Confucianism proves endlessly flexible even as it remains wedded to a particular version of ethical sociality.

Li demonstrates first how deep emotion becomes a unifying horizon of noumenal experience (the noumenon – the “thing-in-itself” – is Kantian) through Qu Yuan’s choice of suicide over life. With this, the thematic of death is introduced into what had hitherto been an aesthetic philosophy grounded in life. Next, Li shows how the Buddhist concern with metaphysics – particularly in the debate over “the proper object of human aspirations” (p. 160) – ultimately enriches the Confucian aesthetic tradition. In its vigorous challenge to Confucianism, Buddhism forces the question of meaning onto the agenda. With monasticism generally rejected in China (unlike in Japan), Chan Buddhism is “reincorporated into a positive view of life (Daoism) and humanity (Confucianism)” (p. 183). Finally, with the Ming, the emergence of “desire” (*yu*) as a topos of aesthetic, materialist and philosophical contemplation changes everything. From this point onward, theorists of aesthetics – including Wang Guowei and Cai Yuanpei – increasingly focus on the relationship between desire and the fundamental Confucian-based spirit of “supramoral aesthetics” (p. 212). Li ends with a hope: that with his retrieval of the Confucian-based tradition “we can get a small taste of what it means to be human” (p. 224).

Reading this elegant book, one certainly is reconnected to a sense of one’s own humanity; whether that sense is in any way uniquely embedded in the Chinese psyche is another story altogether.

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Cities Surround the Countryside: Urban Aesthetics in Postsocialist China

ROBIN VISSER

Durham and London: Duke University Press

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This lively exploration of the Chinese city is an adventurous and eclectic work. The book is designed, rather like a walk through the post-socialist city that it describes, as a cascade of ideas, examples, adventures and observations, all of which are strongly oriented to visual example and experience. The underpinning thesis is that the city is the iconic and demonstrable unit of place currency in contemporary China. Not only is the urbanization of China progressing at an extraordinary rate of change, but the population of China, once predominantly rural, is now geared towards urban aspirations and urban ways of being to the degree that rurality has little political or social purchase.

In his work, Robin Visser aims to add an aesthetic dimension to sociological studies of the Chinese city. He interprets the notion of the aesthetic generously, encompassing not only cinema, architecture, and the fine arts but also fleeting agit-

prop graffiti, and the street encounters of Shanghai that are every bit as visceral and theatrical as those of New York. The book is ambitious in scope, and to a large extent it manages its materials well. I have some questions around the discussion of cultural studies and neo-liberal tendencies (pp. 121ff), which do not in my view accurately represent the state of the field worldwide. I will return to that below.

Necessarily perhaps, the focus is predominantly on Beijing and Shanghai, two cities with huge global impact. Visser positions Beijing as a city of walls that has become a city of possibility offering, as the quintessential wall-artist Zhang Dali puts it, “an opened future” (p. 165) to each new arrival. Beijing is, if you like, the city where every young creative individual must spend time in order to discover the connection between “me” the individual subject, and Beijing the city as subject and progenitor of cultural value. At the core of this attraction is Beijing style, a dynamic and dominant articulation of Chinese cultural life both in China itself and overseas. The relationship between the young and the old is irresistible and the contradictions provoke the fascinating and intense performances that have characterized art praxis in Beijing for 20 years. Visser also reminds us that Beijing does not seek to look outwards, but remains fascinated in itself. It is a supremely confident city and requires that our attention and that of its residents remains focussed on the fact of its centrality. The easy way in which “Beijing” has become a media metonym for China / the Chinese Government/ the Chinese economy and so on, supports Visser’s analysis.

Shanghai is positioned as the cosmopolitan counterpart to Beijing. Visser opens his key chapter by citing Fei Xiaotong’s 1946 article on the “second-hand foreigners” (p. 176), reminding us of the enduring vision of Shanghai as a hybrid city and a city of change and unstable borders. Nonetheless, he asserts that Shanghai’s current brief generates confusion, making it a hybrid of ill-placed nostalgic expectations and falsities. Even its own museums make the point: “Xintiandi is a place that older people consider nostalgic, younger people consider trendy, foreigners consider Chinese, and Chinese consider foreign” (p. 221).

In a short review I will not attempt to engage with Visser’s highly informed discussions of specific artists’ work, suffice to say that he offers dynamic and illuminating readings of several of the key forces in urban art and place-making. Indeed the book reads in some ways like an overdue addendum to Marie-Claire Huot’s wonderful work on the 1980s and 1990s art scene, *La Petite Révolution culturelle*. Visser is similar in his sweep of reference and interest, correctly marking the contemporary territory as diverse and picaresque.

My one dispute with the book is Visser’s critique of aspects of the cultural research movement in Australia. This is not of course a direct assault but rather a defence of the eminent and brilliant Wang Xiaoming, whose interventions in China have been fundamental to the growth of cultural research (rather than culture *wenming*) through his work in East China Normal and Shanghai Universities. Wang is concerned about the political instrumentalization of cultural studies (an example might be the pre-Olympics focus on harmonization through culture championed in Beijing). However, Visser points to Ien Ang’s work as an example of instrumentalism, which I think misunderstands the nature of the work achieved in the Centre for Cultural Research (CCR, Ang’s institutional base). There are instrumentalists in the Australian establishment, but there are also invigorating ways of approaching radical problems through a practical but intellectually rigorous programme of research. I would strongly suggest that Visser revisit the work of Ang and her colleagues with a fresh eye. He then argues that “much of the theory dominating cultural studies in advanced industrial nations is complicit with neoliberal capitalism” (p. 123). His example at this point concerns the counter-racialization of education

and employment privilege for White Americans. The implicit connection between US race politics and applied cultural research in Australia is to me untenable. Australia has plenty of problems with race politics but the CCR is not where you will find them advanced.

That caveat aside, this book is a strong intervention in our understanding of the key contributors to the urban art scene, and to formations of critique in China's cities.

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Spectacle and Sacrifice: The Ritual Foundations of Village Life in North China

DAVID JOHNSON

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Shanxi province is the historian's paradise. Go wherever you would, historical steles lie strewn on the ground, ancient buildings dot the villages, and some of the villages, to this day, perform ceremonies that must have descended through many generations. This book gives a glimpse of what one historian has found to his excitement. Moreover he discovered, through those ceremonies, the ritual foundation of north China's village life.

The content of the book is, for the most part, descriptive. Readers who have followed the many studies of ritual life in China would recognise the style that has characterised the work of Tanaka Issei and the many followers of Wang Chiu-kuei. David Johnson has had the advantage of focusing on a part of Shanxi where ritual texts have also been discovered. Those texts are well used in this study, and they provide the very important backdrop of historical development that many ethnographic descriptions have lacked.

The reporting style that runs through the book carries a sense of excitement that derives from the spectacle of the ceremonies. It describes ritual arenas colourfully fitted out, gongs and drums skilfully played from years of practice, villagers who know precisely how to assume designated roles assigned in long-established repertoires, and, downright bloody and violent exorcism ceremonies, as, for instance, when the drought demon Han Ba appears wearing a fresh sheep's stomach on his head to run amok among the audience, splattering sheep blood from a bowl he carries in his hand until he is grabbed by the participating crowd and ritually beheaded. The titles of some of the ceremonies suggest the same flavour: Chicken-feather monkey, who, if caught by the crowd, has to be killed; the god Lord Guan "beheads Chi You" or "Killing the Yellow Demon." Yet the popular mood changes from one ceremony to the next. By night, the lanterns light up and villagers walk the "nine beds of the Yellow River." Johnson helps us visualize the beauty of the scene as he remarks, "[t]he stream of people moving through the huge array of lanterns under the icy full moon was an impressive sight" (p. 88).

Of course, there was opera. Operas were offered for the gods' entertainment, even though their human supplicants also shared in the pleasure of watching them. Johnson's speculation on the difference between the operas (held on stage) and the ceremonies (held "on the ground") is suggestive. The operas were made up of stories taken from Chinese history, and, perhaps precisely because the gods would be watching from the audience, they had no place in them. The gods appeared only in the ceremonies, especially in processions, represented by villagers wearing masks. The short