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Re-envisioning the Chinese Cityscape: Tabula Rasa and Palimpsest

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Chang-tai Hung, *Mao's New World: Political Culture in the People's Republic*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011.
352 pp.

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

In 1958, Mao Zedong famously compared China's 600 million people to a "blank sheet of paper free from any mark," on which "the most beautiful words can be written" and the "most beautiful pictures can be painted."¹ In his view, China's vast landscapes and its people's mindscapes were a tabula rasa awaiting transformation through his utopian blueprints. Since the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) shifted its center of gravity from rural to urban areas in the late 1940s, however, China's major cities have received the greatest makeovers, in both physical and visual terms. The two books under review in this essay present interdisciplinary inquiries into urban space and visual media in the People's Republic of China (PRC), with a shared focus on Beijing. In *Mao's New World*, Chang-tai Hung examines the forging of a brand new political culture and national identity in the 1950s, when the CCP remade the old capital as a tabula rasa to lay down its foundations. In

Painting the City Red, Yomi Braester inquires into the symbiotic relationship between cinema and cities from 1949 to 2008, when city planners, writers, and filmmakers continually remade Beijing, Shanghai, and Taipei as urban palimpsests.

Mao's New World argues that the Communist experiment did not merely restructure China's political, economic, and social systems but also transformed China's physical spaces and cultural landscape. The book gives a panoramic view of various political and cultural projects that the CCP undertook to build up nationalism and to affirm its legitimacy in the 1950s. Such projects included the expansion of Tiananmen Square and the construction of monumental buildings (discussed in part I of the book, "Space"), the staging of dances and parades (part II, "Celebrations"), the exhibition of revolutionary history through museum artifacts and oil paintings (part III, "History"), the dissemination of visual propaganda like cartoons and "New Year prints" (part IV, "Visual Images"), and the creation of a martyr cult and the Monument to the People's Heroes (part V, "Commemorations"). Drawing on newly available archival documents as well as interviews and memoirs, Hung chronicles the processes by which these new spaces and symbols, images and rituals came into being. His account gives special attention to the decision-making processes of CCP leaders, architects, and artists, as well as Soviet advisers, taking us behind the scenes to consider blueprints, debates, and paths not taken at the planning stages. Indeed, official planners sought the counsel of Soviet city planners as well as Chinese experts regarding the locations, dimensions, shapes, and styles of public architecture (chapter 1, 2, 10). They also appointed cultural bureaucrats and recruited artists to monumentalize the Chinese Revolution in live performances, museum exhibitions, and pictorial images (chapter 3–8). In almost every case, the book shows that the new government's political ideology trumped all other concerns, be it architectural heritage or people's livelihood, historical accuracy or aesthetic diversity. This often resulted in impressive and monumental, yet monolithic and stultified, forms that never became truly popular or sustained appreciation from later critics.

What was to be the identity of a new China and its new capital? Even among Communist Party officials, there were contestations over the form and content of this new political culture, for the new regime had to negotiate a balance between tradition and modernity, foreign influence and Chinese

characteristics. China's "Big Brother" in the 1950s—the Soviet Union—served as an important model by sending advisers to China. Chinese leaders and cultural bureaucrats also visited the Soviet Union, while Chinese artists studied Western painting from imported Soviet magazines and art exhibitions. Yet even though the Soviet Union represented the China of the future, Hung emphasizes throughout the book that China never blindly followed this foreign model but rather strove to create a distinctly *Chinese* identity. This sense of nationalism often meant selectively appropriating Chinese traditions. As a humanist advocate of traditional Chinese architecture, the scholar Liang Sicheng called for protection of the old city's cultural relics and opposed the massive demolition of residential homes (chapter 1). While Party officials rejected these proposals, they did accept Liang's design of the Monument to the People's Heroes, which drew inspiration from Tang dynasty steles and bore traditional symbols of pines, cypresses, chrysanthemums, and peonies (chapter 10). The final designs of Beijing's "Ten Monumental Buildings" from the Great Leap Forward also blended many Chinese architectural motifs, such as the ancient design of big, curved roofs with overhanging eaves, in to the Cultural Palace of Nationalities, the National Agricultural Exhibition Center, and the Beijing Railway Station (chapter 2). Yet nationalist pride seemed to derive less from adding such native colors than from surpassing foreign counterparts: Tiananmen Square was to be five times larger than Moscow's Red Square, Chang'an Avenue was to be wider than Moscow's streets, and the Great Hall of the People was to be constructed at "world record" speed.

While tradition was never preserved for its own sake, *Mao's New World* suggests that the Communist Party was quite skilled at "pouring new wine into old bottles." For instance, the authorities replaced rural community celebrations with May Day and National Day processions and appropriated the Qingming Festival as Martyrs Memorial Day (chapters 4, 9). The *yangge*, considered "the dance of the Chinese Revolution," and New Year prints, popular as home decoration in rural areas, also had deep roots in Chinese folk tradition, yet as soon as the CCP began promoting such "peasant culture" from the Yan'an days, it also reformed and reinvented them by eliminating erotic and religious elements, infusing them with socialist symbols, and orchestrating their production and dissemination on a mass scale. The

reformed version of *yangge* enjoyed considerable popularity immediately after the founding of the PRC and was incorporated in parades, musicals, and university campuses, but the dance lost its appeal within two years. Not only did urbanites with more sophisticated tastes find it too simple, crude, and “rural,” but the regime’s politicization and monopoly of the dance—along with its prohibitions on cross-dressing, flirtation, and “vulgarity”—eventually turned a vibrant art form into “a political cliché” and “mere rhetoric” (chapter 3). Similarly, the new government produced millions of reformed New Year prints (*nianhua*) and injected them with socialist messages by substituting, say, the Martyr Memorial Pagoda for the Stove God or People’s Liberation Army soldiers for Door Gods. Yet according to the urban artists’ own frustrated reports, peasants found these new *nianhua* to be aesthetically dull, religiously inauspicious, and unable to tell a good story, so they simply refused to buy them (chapter 8). Interestingly, the traditional *nianhua* aesthetic had a great impact on “Sinicizing” Western oil painting, such that Dong Xiwen’s seminal *Founding Ceremony of the Nation* used bright, intense colors as well as auspicious symbols of longevity to the great approval of CCP leaders, who in turn rejected more despondent or pessimistic portrayals of revolutionary battles (chapter 6).

Among the most salient aspects of *Mao’s New World* are comparisons to other national contexts. As Hung explains in the introduction, the conceptual framework of “political culture” is indebted to cross-disciplinary studies of the French Revolution, which emphasize politics, symbols, and visual images over economic forces. Comparing the PRC’s new political spaces, monumental architecture, public celebrations, collective commemorations, and show trials to Western precedents and counterparts illuminates similarities and differences. Tracing genealogies of the public square and its festivities from Greek and Roman times to Nazi German rallies shows the generally political, communal, and spectacular nature of organized mass gatherings in public spaces. Hung finds many parallels between Maoist and Stalinist parades, quoting Vladimir Panerny’s insight that demonstrators were audiences “hailed in front of the stage to give everybody a chance to see the ‘king and his staff’”(49). Yet he also finds that state festivals in China were devoid of a carnivalesque spirit and pluralistic character, since the government exercised much tighter control than its French and Soviet

counterparts: “The Party was always at the helm, directing the preselected audience, carefully choreographing and herding them into the vast square, the ritual stage, to heap praise on the Party and its godlike chairman” (108).

Preoccupied with the issue of Party control, *Mao's New World* generally takes a bird's-eye view of its subject, focusing on the political and intellectual elites who created this new political culture rather than on the potential diversity of its popular reception. There are a few rare glimpses into the subjectivities of the common audiences of this propaganda, such as interviews with marchers who remembered how honored and exhilarated they felt to have been chosen (chapter 4). The dismal sales of Party-sponsored New Year prints among peasants, on the other hand, eloquently speak of a collective resistance against the Party's propaganda (chapter 8). Hung warns against any facile assumptions about the efficacy of the government's indoctrination efforts: “Scholars can study the images, the content of political language, and the parades, but these activities tell us little about what exactly the audiences perceived” (20). Since the “subaltern” left few records for the historian to figure out what they “really thought,” the book devotes most of its attention to rich accounts and insightful interpretations of the spaces, images, and historical myths emanating from the political center.

Whereas *Mao's New World* is concerned with Beijing almost exclusively as the nation's capital—a symbolic space for the live performance of political rituals—Yomi Braester's *Painting the City Red* treats Beijing, Shanghai, and Taipei both as inhabited spaces with local residents and as film and theatrical productions, showing how contemporary Chinese cities are made and remade through cinema. Using the term “urban contract” to refer to power negotiations among the authorities, residents, and media producers, Braester argues that the stage and screen arts have not only *represented* cities, but also helped shape their materiality and fashion their identities. Film and drama, in other words, have served as the most important mediators between governmental and grassroots perspectives. Like Hung, Braester uses the word “propaganda” to describe cultural products commissioned by the government. With a much broader historical scope of six decades, however, his book argues that “propaganda, like genre conventions, develops over time and in response to the producers' changing needs,” for instead of “endless repetition of dogma,” it is “context sensitive iterations of contemporary policies” (15). The book's first half (chapter 1–4) discusses plays and films

instigated by the PRC government to promote its urban policies, while the second half (chapters 4–7) focuses on more “independent” cinema that provides alternative urban visions. With much cross-referencing and layering of texts with similar themes, *Painting the City Red* itself has the quality of an elegant and intricate palimpsest.

Tiananmen Square stands aptly in the middle of Braester’s book, in chapter 4, which bifurcates the Maoist and post-Mao eras and, by extension, the square’s status as a monumental place and as an everyday space. The chapter’s focus on cinematic portrayals also provides a fascinating complement and alternative to the treatment of the square in *Mao’s New World*. As implied in Hung’s study but explicitly stated by Braester, Tiananmen has become “a space onto itself,” since the government has made a concerted effort “to exclude the square from the fabric of daily life and fashion it as an autonomous area impervious to the very city whose center it occupies” (151–153). Tiananmen Square is essentially a space for state functions like parades and spectacles, yet Braester compellingly argues that “the site sustained its symbolic power largely due to the cinema” (155). The founding ceremony itself was staged to some extent *for* the cinema, and Tiananmen’s image was disseminated nationwide *through* the cinema. Even former Beijing residents like director Chen Kaige recall the National Day celebrations as documentary newsreels rather than live experiences. It is such official cinematic images that Chen and other artists set out to challenge in Fifth Generation films like *The Big Parade* (1986), in new independent documentaries like *The Square* (1994), and in recent digital video art. In the post-Mao era, increasingly autonomous filmmakers have reclaimed “the material space and filmic practices previously monopolized by Maoist cinema” (172), reincorporating Tiananmen into Beijing’s urban context and the everyday lives of its citizens.

The main stage for Beijing’s everyday life, however, was not Tiananmen Square but the vernacular architecture of courtyard houses (*siheyuan* or *zayuan’r*), which Braester discusses at length as a theatrical and cinematic setting in chapters 1, 3, and 6. The device of using a single courtyard compound as a microcosm for societal and historical change began with the 1951 play and 1952 film *Dragon Whisker Creek*, about the redevelopment of a former Beijing slum inhabited by the city’s proletariat class. Premier Zhou Enlai, writer Lao She, and director of the newly established Beijing People’s Art Theatre (BPAT) first conceived of the drama at a state banquet,

and the resulting production was to propagate the vision of a new socialist urban utopia: the new government improved the workers' living conditions through public works and transformed the enclosure of the courtyard into a public space for the masses (chapter 1). After several decades of deterioration and decay, the courtyard houses faced controversial questions of urban redevelopment. Since the 1980s, debates between "developmentalists" and "preservationists" often played out onstage in a spate of courtyard plays put on by BPAT. While having history play out in a single courtyard could potentially go against the grain of official accounts, Braester shows that such plays appear to take "the residents' viewpoints only to endorse the government's urban policy" (101). Supporting modernization paradoxically through exploiting nostalgia, these plays call for preservation through gentrification, conversion of cultural heritage into tourist attraction, and overall compliance with demolition-and-relocation policies (chapter 3). In contrast to the fundamentally propagandistic nature of these stage plays, Braester argues in chapter 6 that many filmmakers since the 1990s have exhibited a "documentary impulse for preserving the city, if only in image," which "raised poignant questions about the human cost of demolition-and-relocation and inventory the vanishing city" (226). Not only have documentary films tried to serve as time capsules in the face of inexorable development, many postsocialist fiction films have also documented and contemplated, recreated or bidden farewell to Beijing's disappearing neighborhoods.

In focusing on the relationship between city spaces and visual media, *Painting the City Red* presents a number of forceful critiques of existing studies of urban cinema. First, cinema's power derives not only from the apparatus of film exhibition or from the luminosity of its moving images. Braester urges us to pay attention to the political economy that affects the production, distribution, interpretation, and policy consequences of films about cities. Second, past studies of Chinese urban cinema focused on 1930s Shanghai cinema as well as the so-called Sixth Generation and the New Documentary Movement, yet this historiography skips over the Maoist and early reform eras, when visual media also played a major role in envisioning the city and constructing it. By including Maoist cinema in his first two chapters, Braester's new genealogy of Chinese urban cinema demonstrates the underlying continuities across periods and sites. Following the discussion

of *Dragon Whisker Creek* and a socialist Beijing, chapter 2, “A Big Dyeing Vat,” traces Shanghai’s image in socialist cinema, showing how the stage and screen productions of a 1963 campaign to “emulate the Good Eight Company of Nanjing Road” shaped popular views of Shanghai as a decadent and corrupt city: “If Shanghai was threatening to dye the Party black, then the cinema would counter by painting the city red” (56). Braester also includes a chapter on new Taiwan cinema that addresses urban policy by foregrounding the erasure of Taipei’s veterans’ villages and excavating its urban palimpsest (chapter 5). Not only do the two chapters on Shanghai and Taipei provide intriguing comparisons to Beijing, they also extend our understandings of Shanghai cinema beyond the prewar period and our understanding of new Taiwan cinema beyond its auteurs and connections to the native soil literary movement. Finally, chapter 7 concludes the book by examining how directors and real estate developers collaborated on promoting certain visions of Beijing as it geared up for the Olympics. Prominent filmmakers like Zhang Yimou and Feng Xiaogang joined a new elite of cultural brokers in a globalized economy. If the Forbidden City could turn into advertisement images, it is no wonder that cinematic images are used to brand cities and to market real estate. The book ends on a “postcinematic and postspatial turn” as the “latest forms of temporal manipulation of the perception of urban space” (309).

Read in conjunction with each other, *Mao’s New World* and *Painting the City Red* illuminate the entangled relationships between urban space, visual media, and state power. Using a mixed methodology of archival research, interviews, and formal analyses, the authors of both books show how official agencies and institutions sought to remake Chinese cityscapes and their iconologies. Architects, artists, intellectuals, and filmmakers contributed to as well as contested these top-down interventions, some even proposing alternative visions in critical writing or cinema. Whereas Hung is more interested in the creation of national symbols and public monuments, Braester shows greater concern with the demolition of old neighborhoods and vernacular architecture. Whereas Hung focuses more on actual spaces, live performances, and pictorial images in paint and print, Braester emphasizes the mediation of cinema from scripts to plays to screens, from celluloid to the digital. Ultimately, both studies help readers excavate the nuanced palimpsests beneath what might appear like tabula rasae of today’s Chinese cities.

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NOTE

1. Mao Zedong, "Introducing A Cooperative." Speech on April 15, 1958, accessible at http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-8/mswv8_09.htm.