

The Culture of Urbanization in (Post)Socialist China

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

Robin Visser. *Cities Surround the Countryside: Urban Aesthetics in Postsocialist China*. Duke University Press, 2010. 362 pp.

Yomi Braester's *Painting the City Red* and Robin Visser's *Cities Surround the Countryside* offer complementary engagements with urban transformation in P.R. China—though Braester also has a single chapter on Taipei.¹ Each takes as their focus the cultural restructuring that has shaped and been shaped by (post)socialist urbanization and the shifting designs on the city. The works extend the robust conversation about bricks and mortar changes to Chinese cities by emphasizing the importance of cinema, art, theater, literature, design, and disciplines like cultural studies to re-packaging the urban imagination. Visser concentrates on post-reform urban culture, particularly the 1990s and early 2000s, while Braester takes a longer view, charting cinema and urban planning from 1949 to the 2008 Olympic games.

Visser attempts the bigger picture—*urban aesthetics*—even if she takes on a slimmer periodization. She opens by emphasizing the enormous gap between Mao's mandate that the countryside surrounds the cities—both a military tactic and key texture in the socialist planned economy—and the focus on urban development that became official policy by 1980 with the establishment of the first Special Economic Zones. Not only has the city emerged as the demographic center in contemporary China but, Visser argues, “the city became a subject in its own right” during this period (9). Her central aim is to explore how marketized urban development is transforming Chinese culture, offering an “aesthetic dimension” to supplement and reframe the many historical and sociological studies of Chinese cities. Beyond the focus on spectacular statistics—like the announcement in 2000 that China would build 400 new cities by 2020—*Cities* traces how an agrarian culture has re-acclimated to an urban cultural imagination in less than three decades.

¹ See the two authors discuss their books together for Duke University Press: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lykO1EPMs70>.

Following Guy Debord, Visser defines aesthetics as “a new way of seeing and perceiving the world” (4). Her examination of postsocialist urban aesthetics is structured around three new ways of seeing the city. Part One focuses on ways of “conceiving” of the urban and provides the horizon through which the book unfolds. The first two chapters, for instance, explore urban image making, planning practices, the market economy, and the birth of urban cultural studies in the Chinese academy. While broad in scope, the overview is rich in street-level details and will be quite useful for those seeking a deeper understanding of current policies, key figures, intellectual debates and artistic responses to change. What comes across most strongly in the opening pages of Visser’s account, and throughout the book, is that while Chinese-style neoliberal development is destroying China’s urban heritage, despoiling the environment, and leading to greater income disparities, “it has also fostered new realms of agency by provoking creative solutions to urban development, new forms of critical engagement, and nascent civic governance” (20). As such, the work is tilted toward an examination of the emerging agency of intellectuals, artists, writers and filmmakers. I will return to this issue below.

One of the strengths of Visser’s analysis of urban culture is its ability to situate China’s transformation within imbricated global processes, including the new global imaginaries tethered to urban revolution. She describes Chinese intellectuals’ inquiries into market development in the wake of 1989’s Tiananmen Square Massacre, arguing that the question “whither China?” that had so dominated the cultural politics of the 1980s, and before, has given way to regional and global understandings of the urban condition. This turn *beyond* the national is a key element of postsocialist aesthetics. In this context, issues related to global sustainability emerge as key concerns for critics, theorists and practitioners who increasingly recognize the importance of Chinese cities for regional and global futures. China, too, has a world picture.

With this foundation for understanding urban aesthetics in place, Parts Two and Three of the book explore “The City as Subject,” and “The Subject in the City,” respectively. The former centers on Beijing and Shanghai, offering a solid overview of how urban aesthetics are negotiated differently at these key sites: Beijing *performs* the nation, while Shanghai, a hybrid consumption center, “eschews the national.” Visser argues that Beijing natives and immigrant artists, from Wang Shuo and Qiu Huadong to Wang Xiaoshuai and Zhang Dali, are caught up in the political energy of the capital and directly take on local culture, national status, urban identity and the politics of transformation. This process is further complicated by China’s market socialism, where artists’ successes increasingly rely on global markets and capitalist circulations. This fact is key to Visser’s understanding of neoliberalism as both destructive and, at the same time, enabling civic agency. She asserts that it is the very same commercial mechanisms that allow “Beijing artists, now numbering in the

thousands and living in dozens of artist zones and villages around the city's suburbs [to] exploit unique opportunities to perform the national to its citizens" (174).

From the emergence of the city as subject, the final section of the book moves to explore the "psychic" topology of the city, paying particular attention to the impact of the marketized city on gender, ethics, and citizenship. Drawing on urban sociology, psychoanalytic theory and philosophy, the final chapters focus on the construction of subjectivity and everyday urban ethics in 1990s literary fiction.

Like Visser's study, *Painting the City Red* offers a varied methodological approach to media and urbanism—drawing on archival research, textual analysis, urban history, ethnographic observation, and government policy. The book is an intervention in the field of Chinese cultural studies on several accounts. First, contrary to the recent emphasis on the novelty of the so-called *Urban Generation* (Zhang, 2007), Braester charts the intersections of cinematic visuality and city planning projects over six decades. The scope of the study constructs a rich historical framework for thinking about both urban cinema and the cinematic city as such. In fact, *Painting* opens with a compelling account of playwright Lao She's involvement in penning a propaganda play recounting the Communist Party's efforts to improve life for ordinary citizens around a stinking and clogged ditch known as Dragon Whisker Creek. *Dragon Whisker Creek* appeared first as a stage play (1951) and shortly after as a film (dir. Xian Qun, 1952). Importantly, these fictional works prefigured any actual construction in the southern Beijing neighborhood—an instructive illustration for Braester's understanding of film and theater's role in shaping Chinese cities.

Painting is roughly divided into two halves. The first centers on government-initiated plays and films, and on the sometimes awkward collaborations between artists like Lao She and the state. The second half of the book focuses on filmmaking outside of the official PRC production system, including a chapter on post-Chiang Taiwanese cinema. For Braester, the independent production system and the films (and video) it has generated act as a window into the renegotiation of the urban contract—a space linking government, developers and residents. To work through this expansive material, he turns to Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the *chronotope* to explore "the coupling of specific locations and temporal perceptions" (18). For instance, Braester describes *Dragon Whisker Creek*, the focus of Chapter One, as constituting a "prescriptive chronotope" in that it creates a fictional space where pressing social problems are imaginatively engaged through cinematic and theatrical works before the material space of the city is itself rebuilt.

Similar spatio-temporal chronotopes organize each of the chapters. Chapter Two moves away from Beijing to consider the cinematic remaking of Shanghai's notori-

ous Nanjing Road—a commercial center rebranded by the Party after 1949. While the main thrust of the work charts the interactions of cinema and planning policies, theater is also key to the study, providing the central focus for Chapter Three’s exploration of Beijing courtyard houses (*sibeyuan*’r). In particular, the chapter focuses on the state sponsored plays after 1980. Often referring explicitly to *Dragon Whisker Creek*, the post-reform productions provide rationales for demolition and relocation policies and connect new development projects to a long history of making Beijing new. *Goldfish Ponds*, for instance, a sequel to *Dragon* and staged in 2001, depicts the transformation of the very same community from slum to modern apartment buildings. Key elements of the play are even narrated through statues and signage in a new high-rise complex that occupies the site. The turn to official cinema (and theatrical) productions is perhaps the most significant contribution of Braester’s study. Often bracketed as an implied background and sounding board for the discussion of more interesting or provocative works, the attention to official/popular productions throughout is a much-needed addition to current scholarship.

Midway through Chapter Four the book shifts its focus to the impact of non-state productions on urban redevelopment. Successive chapters explore Tiananmen Square, Taipei, and the cinematic engagement with recent experience with demolition and relocation policies in Beijing. Braester’s chapter on Tiananmen, for example, explores not only the way in which the symbolic space has been imbued (and re-imbued) with official significance, but how it is also reappropriated by film, video and artworks that present alternative views of the city. As such, one of the most compelling aspects of the book is the detailed view it brings to development in Beijing over the last 60 years. Four of the book’s seven chapters, for instance, directly engage the remaking of adjacent neighborhoods in central/southern Beijing—from Tiananmen Square to neighborhoods in the traditional “outer city.” After a detour through the gentrification of Taipei, and the overlapping urban aesthetics of Taiwan and the Mainland, Chapter Six examines cinematic responses to demolition and relocation (*chaiqian*) from the early 1980s to the New Documentary Movement.

Both Braester and Visser are interested in how recent media practices engage the politics of transition and suggest forms of civic agency. While no doubt capturing important shifts in everyday Chinese politics, producing a better understanding of the mechanisms that undergird this emergent space is one of the tasks currently facing historians and theorists of Chinese media and culture. If Visser’s study at times unreflexively relies on the logic of neoliberalism and of civil society, Braester’s conception of the urban contract and of “negotiating with power” is too often a Foucauldian blur. These important contributions to post-socialist urban aesthetics thus leave many questions related to contemporary media and political society to be worked through.

In sum, both *Painting* and *Cities* manage to critically engage China without reproducing a Cold War-styled binary that brackets Chinese excesses from many of the very same problems elsewhere: gaps between rich and poor, ecological degradation, conflict over resources, violence, and commercialization, among many other issues. As Braester puts it: “this book . . . does not simply seek to present another account of art in the face of autocratic and ideological state control” (2). Instead, the respective studies can be viewed in relation to both local conditions and the broader transformation of both neoliberalism and (post)socialism under globalization—what Jason McGrath has usefully termed *Postsocialist Modernity*.

Braester and Visser’s accounts are welcome contributions to contemporary Chinese media studies and will be useful to specialists and newcomers alike. They suggest the potential for an emerging field of urban media research by reflecting not only the textual engagements with the city, but the role of representation and practice in animating the city as such. While some may criticize the continued emphasis on Beijing, Shanghai and Shenzhen, *Painting* and *Cities* also suggest just how much more work, current and historical, these emergent media capitals will generate.

Works Cited

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