INTRODUCTION

Toward a short history of visual culture in contemporary China

In this interdisciplinary study, I present and discuss artistic expressions and experiments that are pivotal to our understanding of the logic and complexity of contemporary Chinese visual culture. The six chapters take us from the mid-twentieth century to the present, covering the entire history of the People's Republic. An array of artwork in various media and genres is examined in detail, and more is referred to. Most of these visual objects may be, and some have been, studied in academic disciplines such as art history and film studies, but I believe the notion of visual culture allows us to appreciate their significance in more interactive and more explanatory contexts. More than embodying a specific artistic imagination or conceptual innovation, these works of art take up different positions – from high to low, academic to popular, public to personal – in an evolving structure of visibility, and they contribute instrumentally, as I seek to demonstrate, to the production of a complex visual order and experience that is recognizably Chinese and contemporary. They illustrate a succession of changing practices and paradigms. What this study reveals, I hope, is the deep resonance of continuing efforts to create a distinct Chinese culture and identity in the modern era.

My assertion that these artistic works form part of an ambitious creative project does not mean that contemporary Chinese culture is a monolithic edifice or concept. On the contrary, as the potent visual images and articulations investigated here will show, contemporary Chinese culture is a dynamic as well as a diverse field, driven by a readiness to experiment on many different levels, but also shaped by many forces and constituents. Once we enter this fast-changing field and explore its many trajectories and turning points, we will begin to see that cultural developments in contemporary China are far too complicated, and their respective histories far too intricate, for them to be reduced to a single label or narrative.

A facile dismissal of contemporary Chinese culture as an ominous monolith, therefore, would betray either a distant and uninformed view or a case of willful myopia. My plea for greater historical sympathy and understanding applies to the very notion of visual culture as well. It is problematic, because ultimately ahistorical, to valorize the primacy of visuality in post-industrial consumer societies as a universal postmodern condition. To limit the territory of visual culture to "the transcultural experience of the visual in everyday life" is myopic as it poses little challenge to the existing and unequal global system of image production and distribution.[1] Contemporary Chinese visual culture, I argue, consists of many layers and movements and can hardly be reduced to a mirror image of American or some abstract transnational visual experience.

It is helpful, for comparative purposes, to consider the implications of a recent study of American visual culture. Ever since the early 1990s, we have witnessed in the American academy a steady growth of research interests in

visual culture (or visual studies), a new discipline that has generated a good number of articles, monographs, concepts, debates, and course offerings. A "visual turn" (or what W. J. T. Mitchell prefers to call a "pictorial turn") in the humanities, believed by some to be comparable to and succeeding the momentous "linguistic turn" ushered in earlier by semiotics-based structuralist and post-structuralist theories, seemed to be timely and inevitable. Its proponents often point to the saturation of our contemporary world by images and visuality, finding support in provocative notions such as "the scopic regime" or the "society of the spectacle."

From its beginning, visual culture as an emerging research agenda has maintained a delicate relationship with the established field of art history, although it is an art-historical study of painting and daily experiences in fifteenth-century Italy, published by Michael Baxandall in 1972, that is widely credited for having illustrated the importance of understanding visual culture, or more specifically, for making us appreciate "the period eye" of a given moment.[2] Even more telling, as a chronicler of the rise of visual culture studies finds out, the term "visual culture" first appeared in the title of a 1969 American publication on television and education.[3] In retrospect, this coincidence foretold a productive alliance between film studies and the new interdisciplinary study. By 1995, in his well-noted reflection on visual culture and its intellectual potential, Mitchell was able to refer to it as a "new hybrid interdiscipline that links art history with literature, philosophy, studies in film and mass culture, sociology, and anthropology." It was a new interdiscipline, in Mitchell's view, that ought to distinguish itself from the critical, "iconoclastic" cultural studies with a keen ontological interest in vision and aesthetics. Studies of visual culture "tend to be grounded in a fascination with visual images, and thus to be patient with and attentive to the full range of visual experience from humble vernacular images, to everyday visual practices, to objects of both aesthetic delight and horror."[4]

This description by Mitchell had considerable prescriptive power over the self-positioning of visual culture studies. In its continuing negotiations with art history, visual culture studies seems ever more committed to elevating the popular and the everyday, to acknowledging a wide range of practices of looking while seeking to level hierarchical distinctions between them. There is certainly an appreciable democratizing impulse in this commitment, but lost in the fascination with "everyday visual practices" is often a perception of or insistence on cultural difference and transformation, especially when this everyday life is largely based on experiences in post-industrial, late-capitalist societies, if not more narrowly on an urban setting in such societies. As one commentator observes, overshadowed or downplayed in the elevation of visual culture is "the particular role of the arts to transform the culture of which they are

a part."[5] More recently, Janet Wolff has expressed worries that interests in exploring "the power of images" and "the lure of immediacy" have resulted in the evaporation of the social in theories of visual culture.[6]

The volume *American Visual Cultures*, published in 2005, is interesting to consider because, for one thing, it contains a useful critique of visual culture studies. A collection of essays by multiple authors (many of them based in the United Kingdom), the book engages a series of "visual cultures" in American history from the Civil War of the mid-nineteenth century to the War on Terror at the beginning of the twenty-first. Visual materials analyzed in some thirty short but informative chapters include film, television, photography, painting, illustrations, advertising, and news media. And the topics range from the visualization of Manifest Destiny, images of women in the Civil War, racial gazes, public artwork during the New Deal, Hollywood's Cold War, and Abstract Expressionism, to "queer" photography and post-feminism in TV comedy drama.

In their general introduction to the project, editors Holloway and Beck propose a "social theory of American visual cultures" that will address "the social realm of late American capitalist-democracy," which it is necessary to examine because "we are all conditioned by our structural position within the US-led global market." The social realm in contemporary America, they argue, is "stratified and contested, but it is not intrinsically atomized, any more than it could be described as a seamless historical unity." Moreover, "an essential part of the architecture of the American capitalist-democratic polis" has been the continuing proliferation of visual cultural forms, ever since "the early implementation of sophisticated visual codes in republican portrait painting and in landscape art and photography." Proliferating and innovative visual cultural forms not only saturate American everyday life and continually erode systems of high culture and taste distinctions, but are also an integral productive part of the dynamism and legitimation of the capitalist-democratic order.

With this understanding, the study of visual culture as a constitutive dimension of the American social realm, for Holloway and Beck, ought to be part of the examination that confronts "the role of culture in general in the reproduction of the world, and in the histories that have provided the condition for the emergence of the contemporary over time." Implied in this formulation is a dialectical understanding of the contemporary as both process and result, both historical emergence and systematic reproduction. It is an understanding that enables the two editors to arrive at a critical assessment of visual culture studies that, in their view, first asserted itself as an academic discipline by drawing heavily on "poststructural and postmodern methodologies within cultural studies and social theory."[7]

One indicator of interdisciplinary visual culture studies as "a more or less full-formed 'postmodern' discourse," according to Holloway and Beck, is "its inversion of the old binary that privileged the interrogation of the text's

production over the circumstances in which it is received." There is a determined shift of emphasis in the new interdisciplinary field away from the production of visual culture to consumption of images, away from complex processes of image-making to presumably universally accessible and equal practices of looking. As a result, the editors charge, there is a sense that "visual culture studies has privileged a methodology that is less interested in historicizing culture than in what we might call the culturalizing (or better, the acculturation) of history." There is also a privileging of an abstract, disembodied notion of a global everyday life, happily modeled after the ideal type of urban experience in a post-industrial and consumerist society (if not simply the Fifth Avenue in New York), over the uneven and unequal lived experiences across separate societies and locations.

On this point, I find the observations by Holloway and Beck both timely and provocative:

> While it is one thing to suggest that history is made up of everyday experience as it is actually lived and understood by human beings, it is another thing entirely to imply, as visual cultural studies has sometimes done, that it is only everyday experience that constructs history, or that our everyday experience of the world around us is identical with the way that history works.[8]

Their example of a US energy company's logo displayed on a billboard in Kabul or Baghdad is a poignant one. As a visual statement, the logo may be looked at or consumed in a number of ways, and different meanings may be construed around it, but none of the practices of looking "would necessarily trouble or dislodge the historical meaning of that image as an emblem of US corporate power" backed by corporate capital and military might.

Here Holloway and Beck make their most trenchant intervention:

> That visual culture studies has tended to conceive the viewing subject as a "consumer" of images (rather than as a "citizen", say, who is a "participant observer") suggests that the dominant critical paradigm of the field accepts the logic of the late capitalist market-place as a historical given, rather than as something that has been contested, or that can be contested, and whose development over time has taken place at the exclusion of other possible modes of securing our material life.[9]

This critique is particularly relevant to our present project because it cautions us against glossing over historical processes, and it underscores the importance of historicizing visual culture against its grain. It also helps us appreciate the fact that, for contemporary Chinese visual culture, the late-capitalist marketplace logic is far from a given in its formation over time, but was fiercely contested and even resisted in recent history. And that history of contestation and resistance is still visible as a meaningful remainder, even, or especially, when a market economy seems to have prevailed and penetrated the fabric of social life in contemporary China.

As we look into the rich visual forms and expressions generated with and for a social vision not centered on the marketplace, we will see ever more clearly that the intended viewing subject was indeed seldom imagined to be a consumer, and that producers of such visual culture assumed a very different position as well. The critical relevance of contemporary Chinese visual culture, as I explain in this study, consists in the *denaturalization of the marketplace logic* that an investigation into the historical formation of the current visual system will lead to, and in the other historical visions and processes that such an investigation will also make visible. To fully engage this visual culture and its historical specificity, we realize that we will need to address a new set of issues and devise corresponding concepts and analytical approaches. We must ask intelligent questions in order to reveal and acknowledge, instead of obscuring, the underlying logic of a diversity of creative efforts, of different paradigms for artistic imagination.

At an early point in their introduction to *American Visual Cultures*, Holloway and Beck state that their project is motivated by a deep concern with "what we, along with many others around the world, consider to be a renewed historical transparency in the operating of American power-elites on the global stage." They refer to the development of a "transnational American studies" in Europe in the 1990s and see their work as continuing that of dismantling the ideological myth of "American exceptionalism," arguing that the contemporary systems of power-relations are as global as they are American.[10] (Mark Rawlinson, another British scholar, published in 2009 a single-authored volume on *American Visual Culture* and framed his enterprise along similar lines.[11]) To study American visual culture in this context is tantamount to unmasking the universalist claims of American exceptionalism and examining their global ramifications. It implies not only a firm grasp of the historicity of various visual practices and pleasures, but also a clear sense of our own embeddedness in the contemporary world.

Whether or not this group of concerned British scholars succeeds in unmasking or halting the "historical transparency" (or rather unprecedented blatancy) of American global power through examining its capacity for visual production may remain an open question, but their reflection on methodology, in particular their self-positioning with regard to the object of their inquiry, offers us a valuable lesson. Visual culture studies is intrinsically interdisciplinary, argue Holloway and Beck, because it not only recognizes the overlapping plurality of its object of study, but also considers the totality of contexts in which we undertake our study. It is a relational totality that is also provisional, "in the sense that it expands or contracts, becoming plastic or porous, according to the diversity of social and historical experience in which the interests of students, teachers and critics are formed."[12]

For the same reason, how we approach contemporary Chinese visual culture hinges upon as much as exposes our own viewing position, or, put differently, our understanding of contemporary China and its relevance. Our respective viewing positions may be informed by many sources and interests, and as a result they allow us to assemble different, even conflicting, scenarios and narratives. The narratives with the most explanatory power, however, are those that also seek to spell out and explain the motivations for telling the story in the first place.

The brief history of visual culture in contemporary China that I attempt here will challenge two narratives prevalent in Western mainstream perceptions of China that find their variations in many related discourses and assumptions, including academic studies. One such narrative describes China today as held together forcibly by a bankrupt authoritarianism, with economic development as the last and dubious resort of legitimation for the existing order. This narrative, with its conceptual origins traceable to European Enlightenment *philosophes*' denunciation of Oriental despotism, underwrites the most virulent form of contemporary "China Threat" hysteria because, by denying legitimacy to the Chinese political system and reality, it not only identifies an ideological enemy to the liberal-democratic West, but also precludes any patient or meaningful engagement with the many dimensions, such as culture, of a living society.

One logical extension of this (lack of) legitimacy narrative, as I discuss further in Chapter 5, is the dissidence hypothesis, which presupposes any expression of criticism voiced in China to be an act of political dissidence against a repressive regime and therefore worthy of sympathy and outside support. The irony is that such a politically dominated and reductive presupposition closely duplicates the reasoning underlying the idealist fervor of "putting politics in command" during the Cultural Revolution era in China itself. It is also a view that readily falls back and draws on the demonization, with its unmistakable racial undertones, of a menacing "Red China" during the Cold War. Here may be one explanation as to why we do not see much of a difference between the left and the right, or the liberal and the conservative, in the political spectrum of the West when it comes to voicing outrage against contemporary China as an authoritarian other. This is why a presidential hopeful in the 2011–12 election season in America would have no qualms about announcing that his realpolitik agenda was to "take China down" by inciting the internet generation in that country so that America would remain on top and win back its economic muscles.[13]

Another popular and equally reductive narrative portrays China as having in recent decades opened up and moved steadily, in large part pushed by the enabling hand of the market and global capital, from

political fanaticism and economic egalitarianism to an embrace of entrepreneurialism, greater individual freedom and increasing access to Western products and values. This is a more complex narrative and its basic plot appears compatible with narrations of the development of contemporary China that we also find in mainstream media and historiography in China. To the extent that it acknowledges contemporary Chinese society as becoming ever more diverse, energetic, and integrated into the global economy, this narrative of a historic opening-up certainly is persuasive and offers a good starting point.

Yet as it is told in Western mainstream media, this story often turns into an exercise in short-term historical memory, through which the long revolutionary history in modern China is reduced to little more than what ought to be negated and forgotten. Missing from this near-sighted view of contemporary China are any efforts at appreciating the historic necessity as well as significance of the revolution that in the mid-twentieth century profoundly transformed the Chinese nation. The revolution was fostered, as the renowned historian Joseph Levenson saw it, by the cosmopolitan spirit of several generations of Chinese and "may be interpreted, in cultural terms, as a long striving to make their museums themselves."[14]

On the grand stage of the modern world, Levenson observed sympathetically, the Chinese "had to escape being exhibits themselves, antiques preserved for foreign delectation." Ever since the earliest days of the twentieth century, the desire to create a new culture that is both modern and Chinese, that will allow the Chinese to represent themselves on the world stage – "against the world to join the world" – has been a driving force behind many revolutionary and reformist programs. This enduring cosmopolitan aspiration was emphatically reaffirmed when the Communist victory and the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949 asserted the subjecthood of the Chinese people in a world-historical sense and embraced the vision of a New China, most famously laid out by Liang Qichao in his unfinished political fiction from 1902, as a sovereign and strong modern nation-state among the family of nations. Of foremost priority on the massive reconstruction agenda of New China was the creation of a new socialist culture that, by synthesizing the native and the foreign, the traditional and the modern, the virtuous and the revolutionary, would make a distinct contribution to an emergent world culture.

Yet less than two decades into the history of the young People's Republic, the danger of war "in an embattled age of possible destruction," commented Levenson, derailed the cosmopolitan project and "gave the Cultural Revolution its dual targets, the two cultures, western and traditional."[15] Levenson was writing in the spring of 1969, when the Cultural Revolution was still raging across China and access to information was severely limited. Nonetheless he showed extraordinary insight into the Chinese revolutionary psyche and, from his commanding view of the

dialectical movement of modern Chinese history, he understood the devastations unleashed by the mass political campaign as ultimately a defensive response to the destabilizing geopolitical threats from outside. As a result, he had the confidence to predict (between 1968 and 1969!) that "one way or another (the choice of ways is fearful), China will join the world again on the cosmopolitan tide."[16] And history has proven his perspicacity. In the last quarter of the twentieth century, China did repudiate the radical "cultural provincialism" of the Cultural Revolution and resumed the cosmopolitan orientation in rejoining a changed world. As a state-sponsored project, this return or opening-up relied for its legitimation and success on the many legacies – from political symbolism to institutional infrastructure to mobilizational mechanisms – of the Chinese revolution, even though it also entailed drastic changes in many practices and conceptions, including the purposes and functions of the government. Not surprisingly, the reform era also prompted extensive debates and reflections on the revolutionary heritage.

Without understanding the logic of revolutionary cosmopolitanism ("let foreigners not be cosmopolitans *at Chinese expense*," as is spelled out by Levenson) or the Chinese revolution as an inevitable and necessary foundation, we would not be able to make sense of much of Chinese society or culture today. Indeed, we would find ourselves acting like many media commentators in the West, who seem simply unable to reconcile what they regard as stunning outbursts of Chinese national pride and patriotic fervor with Chinese consumers' astonishing appetite for Western brand names, or to comprehend why, as I explore in Chapter 5, Chinese viewers should find *The Founding of a Republic* an engaging as well as an entertaining film. We would, again like many an ill-informed outside observer, hold onto the events in 1989 as the defining moment of contemporary China and equate the Cultural Revolution to the history of the Chinese revolution, if not to modern Chinese history altogether.[17]

Against a broad backdrop of historical change and continuity I view and study contemporary Chinese visual culture. "Contemporary" is understandably an elastic notion, but in this study I intend it to refer to the period from the founding of the PRC in 1949 to the present, drawing on an established periodizing category in literary studies in China. (For this highly evolved academic tradition, "modern literature" is a specific concept and conventionally covers literary developments from around 1915 to 1949.) The advantage as well as challenge of utilizing this designation of the "contemporary" comes from the fact that it compels us to narrate and think through the successive stages that form the complex contours and layers of contemporary culture, or, as Holloway and Beck put it, "the histories that have provided the condition for the emergence of the contemporary over time." This does not mean the history of New China since 1949 is the outer limit to the sources or manifestations of

contemporary culture. For instance, the conception of a painting such as *The Bloodstained Shirt*, as I discuss in Chapter 2, draws on images and texts from a long pre-PRC revolutionary history. Another example may be the robust revival today of traditional or pre-revolutionary beliefs, rituals, customs, ceremonies, and even superstitions, most of which were once strenuously denounced and suppressed during the nation's drive for a cosmopolitan modernity. A study of contemporary culture may not include a full account of the originations of such cultural traditions, but it should nonetheless explain the contemporary significance of their revival, and the process of explaining is where we try to restore historical depths to the notion of the contemporary and approach it as a historically determined emergence.

Here I should reiterate the claim of limited scope that we find in many a volume on visual culture. The objective of organizing a volume on *American Visual Cultures*, as its editors make clear, is not "to present an exhaustive account of modern American history." "Nor would we claim to have assembled a comprehensive taxonomy of American visual cultures, or of the possible approaches to visual culture criticism."[18] All of these disclaimers are applicable to the present volume, and, given the fact that my study here has a modest episodic structure similar to Mark Rawlinson's volume on American visual culture, I share his hope that the book will serve to generate more interest in issues raised either directly or indirectly here. This is indeed "a suggestive rather than exhaustive survey" of possible topics in a study of paradigms and shifts in contemporary Chinese visual culture.[19]

The artistic work and objects that I highlight and analyze in the volume belong to a history of visual culture that contains many shifts and realignments, changing values and expectations. They also reveal a continually vibrant cultural production dedicated to addressing, always in its own terms and contexts, many issues that we recognize as similarly important in other contemporary cultures and societies, such as the tension between high or elite and popular art forms, the evolving positions of the avant-garde, and the complicated relationships between art, politics, and commerce. One central formation that brings these familiar issues together and yet gives them a specific and far-reaching historical turn is that of socialist visual culture, the creation of which, as I discuss in Chapter 1, was a collective and deeply inspiring project in the 1950s, the period of socialist collectivization and construction, or high socialism, in China.

Socialist visual culture is the starting point in the brief conceptual history that I offer here, because this is a moment that expressed a critical awareness of the relationship between the visual and social transformation. It projected a visual order in which the traditional hierarchy between fine art and popular art should be overcome, and a radically new visuality and structure of visibility should be promoted by all available means. (For this