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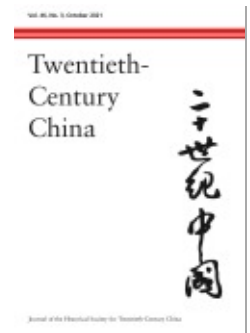
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Twentieth-Century China, Volume 46, Number 3, October 2021, pp.
309-315 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/tcc.2021.0026>



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REVIEW ESSAY

THREE NEW WORKS ON MODERN CHINESE ART AND VISUAL CULTURE

MIA YINXING LIU

Artistic endeavors in the People's Republic of China (PRC) are approached via innovative perspectives and methods by the authors of three recent studies that examine diverse examples of visual culture during the PRC era. These studies shift critical attention to reveal the formative processes of ideas—such as socialist realism, national-style cinema, or secrecy—that have been previously taken for granted, treat them as discourses, and disclose contestations, interconnections, and multidirectional movements across boundaries.

This essay discusses the following works. Daisy Yan Du. *Animated Encounters: Transnational Movements of Chinese Animation, 1940s–1970s*. Asia Pop! Series. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2019. 259 pp. \$90.00 (cloth), \$30.00 (paper). | Margaret Hillenbrand. *Negative Exposures: Knowing What Not to Know in Contemporary China*. Sinotheory Series. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020. 292 pp. \$104.95 (cloth), \$27.95 (paper). | Christine I. Ho. *Drawing from Life: Sketching and Socialist Realism in the People's Republic of China*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2020. 308 pp. \$70.00 (cloth).

KEYWORDS: animation, Chinese painting, drawing and sketching, modern Chinese art, socialist realism, national-style cinema, photography, secrecy

The three books reviewed here are each an exciting addition to the study of art and visual culture during the People's Republic of China (PRC; 1949–present), a period that previously has not received much scholarly attention in Western languages. Christine I. Ho's book focuses on the drawing and sketching in fine arts in the first two decades of the PRC; Daisy Yan Du's book examines Chinese animation from Japanese-occupied Shanghai to the 1970s; Margaret Hillenbrand's book explores a type of photography-related visual culture in China from the 1980s to the present. While these subjects alone promise to move the field of modern Chinese art and visual culture forward, they are also great contributions to the new direction in the historical study of socialist China that demonstrates the “heterogeneity, limited pluralism and tensions between official and unofficial cultures.”¹ The methods and perspectives displayed in all three books are innovative and inspiring. They shift

1 Jeremy Brown and Matthew D. Johnson, “Introduction,” in Jeremy Brown and Matthew D. Johnson, eds., *Maoism at the Grassroots: Everyday Life in China's Era of High Socialism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 12.

critical attention to reveal the formative processes of ideas—such as socialist realism, national-style cinema, or secrecy—that have been previously taken for granted, treat them as discourses, and disclose contestations, interconnections, and multidirectional movements across boundaries. In turn, the subjects of their study, whether it is “drawing from life,” animation, or “photo-forms,” provide a set of revelatory lenses that unveil another side of the picture of Chinese art and visual culture of past decades that was not static nor predetermined by dichotomies of repression and rebellion but that are emergent, negotiated, and transnational.

“Drawing from life,” both as an institutional imperative and as an artistically innovative objective, has been an important concept and practice in Chinese art since the beginning of the twentieth century but has been especially essential in the fine art regime of the PRC, as drawing and sketching became revolutionary praxis in the socialist Chinese cultural world. The Chinese term *xiesheng* (写生)—like its English equivalent “drawing from life”—is ambiguous and therefore provided ample allowance for a host of diverse discursive directions. As a result, it remained a perennial nomenclature in spite of the twists and turns in the ideological and political tumult in modern Chinese art. It encompassed important debates such as modern art vs. academicism, observation of nature vs. copying, plein air vs. brushstroke modeling (*cunfa* 皴法), traditional composition vs. scientific perspectivism, and manual labor vs. mental work, to name only a few. It has also been at the core of values such as “immediacy” and “authenticity” that were fundamental in revolutionary aesthetics, not to mention that it remained at the center of construction of the nucleus of the Maoist art regime, socialist realism. Suffice it to say, few artists could have escaped from the imperative or the impetus to grapple with it in their careers, no matter what media or genres they chose to work in, and no reformation of a Chinese art academy was complete without the incorporation of “drawing from life” in the curriculum. At certain moments, the very survival of an institution such as *guohua* (国画 brush-and-ink painting) in Maoist China seemed to have hinged on whether and how “drawing from life” was processed in its practice. However, for such a ubiquitous practice, scholarship on this subject has been by and large scanty. Speculative reasons for this neglect include the wholesale dismissal of modern art in China (and the rest of the non-Western world for that matter) as emulative of the West and therefore secondary, the conventional wisdom that art during the Maoist period was the mechanical product of totalitarian propaganda and therefore lacked the intellectual textures or the individual ingenuity worthy of scholarly pursuit, and a preference of individual artists’ lionized efforts of rebellion or victimhood to constitute an alternative, if not a more “authentic,” history of Maoist art that performed to the tune of Euro-American-centered modern art or a Cold War-style historiography. Emerging into this significant gap, Christine I. Ho’s book, *Drawing from Life: Sketching and Socialist Realism in the People’s Republic of China*, focuses squarely on “drawing from life” in the two decades between the founding of the regime and the full onslaught of the Cultural Revolution. Rather than taking the tenets of socialist art such as socialist realism as a given and a fixed idea handed down from the Soviets, this study carefully examines the formational process of the discourses on fine art in the Maoist era and compellingly presents “drawing from life” as the locus wherein socialist visual culture was formed and institutionalized.

"Drawing from life" as a concept is approached in this book as both a gestural form of image-making as well as an inchoate stage of being: as sketching, it tracks and registers the painter's hand, either purposefully or by chance, therefore opening ground for ideological or even spiritual testament as well; as a process of coming into being, it is synecdochically evocative of the experiment of socialist visual culture itself in the fledgling PRC. Therefore, drawing from life, both as an individual art practice and in the form of organized mass sketching tours, has constituted generative and formative acts in the evolving and metamorphosing search for forms to visualize a new, emergent state order. On this point, Ho provides insightful and careful case studies across an astonishingly rich range, including the institutionalization of drawing pedagogy after the European academic model and the Soviet Chistiakov system, the impossible tension between the ethnographic visuality and the creation of "peasant subjectivity" during the mass sketching tours, the tug-of-war of medium specificity between watercolor and brush-and-ink painting in the works of Li Keran (李可染), the construction of the technological sublime in Maoist landscape painting through mass sketching tours, the inconsistency between historicity and representation revealed by the "drawing from life" experience of Dong Xiwen (董希文) on his Long March sketching tour, and so forth. Among this rich tapestry, Ho's examination of organized mass sketching tours such as the one led by Fu Baoshi (傅抱石) in 1960 is especially poignant. As she demonstrates, these tours were not only transformative in relation to both how to paint the new nation and what to become as a legitimate artist in New China but also integral to developing what Ho aptly calls the "politics of recognition." By the "politics of recognition," Ho means the exercise through which the artist, in engaging with the real scene and different regional art practices, recognizes and envisages collective socialist life as palpable, physical existence (80).

In this well-researched, groundbreaking, and eye-opening work, Ho is meticulous in her attention to formal analysis as well as to the details of historical context, yet they are woven effortlessly into an insightful and cogent account. What is equally impressive is her ability to steer through the many different directions that "drawing from life" could take. Drawing from life is not an easy term to track, as it slipped in and out of the fabric of the socialist art discourses and masqueraded as an avatar for a myriad of campaigns and objectives. Ho shows the ability to keep a critical distance from the shifting parameters and address the many complexities and nuances that came up in the name of "drawing from life" during each historical period. Her notes on the discursive rupture and union within drawing from life is especially astute. While drawing has an open-ended and unfinished nature and is endowed with a quality of unfettered self-expression (also known as romanticism), it is also a disciplinary mechanism, regulating modern perception, through its cornerstone role in artistic pedagogy. It is upon this paradoxical praxis that socialist art's union of revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism was founded, but not without all its ambiguities and precarity.

As an original and rigorous study of the art of Maoist China, this book is no doubt a new milestone for the field. It also offers an elegant alternative to the impasse between the Euro-American-centrist modernist bias stuck in the mythic trench of originality or individual masters and the Cold War historiography that conceives of the purpose of socialist art as solely driven by the nexus of oppression and resistance. This book exemplifies the idea that a focus on the process, rather than taking socialist realism or other claims as a fixed reality, leads to wonderful discoveries and, therefore, is much more rewarding and fruitful.

Daisy Yan Du's book, *Animated Encounters: Transnational Movements of Chinese Animation, 1940s–1970s*, is a study that fills another significant gap in the account of Chinese film history and also a great contribution to the field of the history of world animation. The high value of this book first and foremost lies in the fact that it provides a much-needed examination of an important part of Chinese cinema: Chinese animation from the 1940s to the 1970s, between the War of Resistance against Japan and the Cultural Revolution (or between the Pacific War and the Cold War in another historical periodization). The subject of animation in China has previously lacked scholarly attention in Chinese film historiography: indeed this is the first monograph in English on the subject.² The field, without much of an existence to begin with, also suffers from the conventional idea of calcified “national styles,” that Chinese animation, Japanese animation, and Disney each carry a somehow predetermined and essentialized look, instead of being historically and transnationally formed by exchanges and interconnections. This perception is especially dominant in the case of the historical account of Chinese animation, as what is considered to be its golden era happened in fact during the 1950s and 1960s, one of the most insular periods of Chinese cultural industry. Du's approach to this history is therefore rather illuminating and fascinating, as she calls attention to the transnational and internal “movements” and “encounters” in Chinese animation. In particular, her case study of the complex and multidirectional interchanges between Chinese and Japanese animation during the war is especially enlightening, as it shows a map of exchanges and collaborations that cannot be easily settled with conventional notions of national cinemas or the fixed concept of “influences.” Although the Wan brothers in Shanghai were inspired by Disney's innovations, such as *Snow White* (1937), their groundbreaking masterpiece, *Princess Iron Fan* (1941), the first animated film in Asia, was by no means a mimicry of any “original” but a product of innovation and negotiations with different discourses at work. As *Princess Iron Fan* set the gold standard for Asian animation at the time, it was an object of admiration and adoration for the Wan brothers' Japanese peers, including Tezuka Osamu (手塚治虫), and this fascination helped launch a new era of Japanese animation. In the ensuing decades, the bond founded on the Wan brothers' fantastic animation of the marvelous tales of the *Journey to the West* continued. Japanese animation artists such as Mochinaga Tadahito (持永忠仁) also worked in China in the early decades of the PRC, following their previous employment at the Man'ei, the film company established by the Japanese Manchukuo enterprise. Today, as Japanese animation remains one of the most powerful influences in Asia and the world and as the construct of a Chinese national animation style seems to have succeeded in “purging” these cultural exchanges and hybridities, it is easy to neglect and forget that history. However, Du does not confine her studies to simply showing us this history but also raises critical questions that complicate the issues even further: how did *Princess Iron Fan*, a Chinese film not without embedded messages of resistance against Japanese imperialist invasion, travel across the opposing sides of war and become so well received in Japan? What role did gender, in the person of a “princess,” rather than the male persona of Sun Wukong the Monkey King, play in

2 There are two Chinese-language works chronicling the history of Chinese animation: Bao Jigui, *Zhongguo donghua tongshi* [General history of Chinese animation] (Beijing: Lianhuanhua chubanshe, 2010); Sun Lijun, *Zhongguo donghua shi yanjiu* [Historical study of Chinese animation] (Beijing: Shangwu yin shu guan, 2011).

this film's "travel" between China and Japan during wartime? And how and why did the female figure, Princess Iron Fan, disappear in the ensuing Japanese response to the Wans' masterpiece? Such questions are precisely where the inquiry into the processes of national cinema is at its most compelling and revelatory.

The book is organized within an overarching theoretical framework, namely the notion of movement and flexibility, which Du ascribes to animation's medium specificity. The leitmotif word "movements" encompasses quite a range of issues here. First, Du convincingly argues for the medium specificity of animation on the basis of "movements," citing Sergei Eisenstein's classic concept of plasmaticness and Norman McLaren and Thomas Lamarre's revisionist notion of movements between the frames or the layers (12). She then goes further to morph animation's "movements" toward "malleability" in terms of ideology, thereby explaining how animation had moved across different national borders and ideological divides, even during wars hot and cold and under the totalitarian curtains. This medium specificity is also the basis for her account of the so-called golden age of Chinese animation during the Maoist era, when animation was prospering while live action cinema was practically shut down. While her case studies are quite persuasive in demonstrating Chinese animation's odd, if not unique, ability to travel across thorny boundaries, they also raise questions regarding how exactly these transnational movements can be measured against the history of socialist visual culture. In other words, did Chinese animation "move" around relatively freely in spite of the boundaries? If yes, these movements do not necessarily suffice to replace the general picture of socialist visual art with a lively one with fluid movements, which the book's overall claim seems to lead to. Moreover, to expand the notion of animation's movements and plasmaticness to that in ideology and diplomacy strikes one as poetry, and there is room for further explanation, interrogation, and elaboration regarding the relationship between the apparatus of animation and ideology. For one thing, the limited and relative freedom that Chinese animation was granted during these circumstances could well be due to a host of reasons: besides the Wan brothers' astonishing artistry in animation that was ahead of their Asian peers, *Princess Iron Fan* featured a tale from *Journey to the West*, a cultural heritage that had already enjoyed a transnational establishment for centuries, especially in Japan, and therefore sat well with the Japanese "Greater East Asia Coprosperity Sphere" scheme. There indeed seem to be a few decoys at animation's disposal, including the notion that it has been regarded as an art for children, the art of fantasy, or a vehicle for a simple laugh. While all these decoys have been effective means for animation to move across boundaries in these episodes of history, they are not necessarily the medium's exclusive privilege. Perhaps another way to present this complex history of Chinese animation is to examine how Chinese artists, as well as their international peers, deployed a multitude of plasmatic strategies to enable such a rich and complex cinema of border crossing, without a hasty and forceful attribution to the predisposed notions of medium specificity.

The title of Margaret Hillenbrand's book contains the phrase "knowing what not to know in contemporary China," which, whether as an aspirational declaration or description of the current situation, is in itself thrilling and daunting at the same time. Since ancient times, to the outside world, the mystique of secrecy appears to have shrouded the idea of the Chinese Empire. The contemporary Chinese state, though it has ostentatiously renounced many of the dynastic practices of statecraft as feudal and professed

its adherence to a special edition of Communism, seems to have developed even more finesse in using secrecy to its advantage in its management of information directed both to its own citizens and to the world outside. This timely book, written at a juncture when China seemingly has acquired quite a swagger and looms large on the horizon of another cold war between its professed power and any rival that comes in its way, examines the mechanism of “secrecy” as a main structuring force in contemporary Chinese society.

For this examination, Hillenbrand urges us to shift our attention to literature and visual culture, instead of the disciplines of the social sciences. She especially focuses on what she calls the “photo-forms,” namely riffs on certain keystone photographic images that are at the core of the things “not to know” in contemporary China. They range from book cover designs, students’ homework, and internet chatters to museum exhibition installations and critically acclaimed art works, as long as they somehow “repurpose” photographic images. From among the mass of photo-forms in today’s superfluous image-sphere, the book singles out four case studies, including those of an archival photo of a Japanese soldier beheading a Chinese man during the Nanjing massacre, of household family portraits during the Cultural Revolution, of a photographic portrait of a school principal who was beaten to death by her pupils during the Cultural Revolution, and of the Tank Man photo taken on the fateful day of the Tiananmen protests in 1989. In examining these cases, Hillenbrand’s interest lies in revealing not the secrets but the mechanism of how secrets work in Chinese contemporary society, in terms of both the keeping and the secretion of secrets. The key term at the core of this project is “public secrecy,” which recalls the influential notion that anthropologist Michael Taussig advanced in his book *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative*.³ Closely following Taussig’s concept, which focuses on the formational agency of the socially collaborative management of secrecy, Hillenbrand also asserts that it is public secrecy that is the overlooked “structuring force in Chinese socio-political life today” (12). This is also the reason that she advocates for the study of representations, as the inherent slippage between historicity and narration in representational arts best reflects the public secrecy at work. While *representations* at large, even without being designed to be allegorical or rebus-like, already require layers of “deciphering” and “uncovering” and other kinds of parallel reading, Hillenbrand is sharp to note that photographic images in particular are poised at a peculiar pressure point, holding a distinctive advantage over textual representations and other media in their ability to “shadow box” with the state’s management and manufacturing of history. In a logocentric cultural tradition and a regime of cryptocracy, the photographic image, with its vestige of the “truth claim” and the pathos of “what has been,” packs a powerful punch yet also somehow evades even the most draconian censorship. However, straight still photographs in their original form do not provide the elusive parallel readings that Hillenbrand deems to befit secrecy, because they are famed as direct. But the photo-form, through its repurposing, riffing, and remediating of the original photo, muddles this directness, “unfixes” the image, and adds the interpretive layers that become spaces for secrecy. Therefore, if a still photograph, which is the ground zero of each case studied in this book, always reminds us of the passage of time between the instant it was taken and

3 Michael Taussig, *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999).

our present time of viewing it, the photo-form that Hillenbrand addresses is to visualize that passage, the confrontation between “then” and “now,” and render into visual forms the agencies and powers battling at given times.

A courageous and revelatory work such as this, which is also beautifully written, surely blazes new trails and opens up many questions. More inquiries can be made about the specifics and differences among these photo-forms and how they have been treated in this book. While Hillenbrand is rather persuasive theoretically in the liberal corralling of the photo-forms, the original photos on which each chapter is based have some incongruences and might benefit from more treatment, as these incongruences can potentially confound and enrich the overarching claim. Specifically, the beheading picture from the Nanjing massacre, the family portraits from the Cultural Revolution era, the portrait of the murdered teacher Bian Zhongyun (卞仲云), and the Tank Man photo were all made under very different circumstances and with very different intentions and belong to different genres or forms of photography. If photo-form is where and how the Chinese present grapples with the past, its complex relationship to these original photos is a key part of the critical inquiry. If these photo-forms are the agencies in this collaborative and formational model of public secrecy, then they should be treated as such. Their difference commands that the public’s grappling with them, whether complicit or antagonistic, takes on different contours. Addressing and splitting these differences might shed light and add more texture to both the argument about contemporary Chinese society and a more global and nuanced understanding of public secrecy, rather than conforming to it.

This book is also an audacious effort that urges us instead to take a look at the multiple agents, or “stakeholders” in Hillenbrand’s term, at work in the Chinese regime of secrets. One of these agents is the Chinese public. Hillenbrand reveals a much-neglected area in the discussion of Chinese cryptocracy to this day, if only as seen from a state vs. public binary and via a romantic imagination of the Chinese public, that being the notion of complicity and the very idea that the maintenance of secrecy is a conspiratorial and collective effort. It is the issue of complicity that has been the most dangerous landmine in the field of Chinese modern history and underlies many of the secrets discussed in the book. What happens under the Chinese regime’s so far bulletproof and disaster-proof dome is the cooperative participation of the public. The motivation for the complicity is in itself a complex matrix. Complicity not only in the events that have happened but also in the comanagement of the secrecy afterward is perhaps the most dangerous shoal that the contemporary Chinese battleship of “harmony” wants to avoid.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

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