

some of the most novel data included in the chapter on “Burlesque.” Zhuangzi pities the abandoned skull, discovered by the roadside, and takes it home to use as a pillow. The skull appears in a dream – a classic communication from the beyond, of a type that occurs at the very start of the book under review – and politely challenges his charitable sentiments, claiming in effect that there is a lot to be said for being dead. Why? “The dead have no ruler.” Until reading Fred Blake’s study, Zhuangzi always seemed to me more than a little quixotic here. We know that even before his time the unseen world was hierarchical, at least as understood by some, and his efforts to claim this contested space for anarchy appear to have been completely overwhelmed by its evolution into the grim judicial bureaucracy recently described by Paul Katz, and still graphically depicted by a number of Chinese religious groups. Or has even this unpleasant form of law and order broken down completely now, leaving a wild dystopia in which simulacra of guns are sent to the other world to protect the mahjong winnings of the deceased? Yet worse, there are even allegedly examples of supposed thermonuclear weapons having been dispatched to the dead (pp. 186–88).

But maybe this is precisely Zhuangzi’s point, and an entirely materialistic one, at that: neither the state, nor its weak surrogates amongst China’s permitted institutional religions, can do anything to curb the construction of new and completely unregulated conceptions of the world of the dead. This is governed by no authority, save the autocephalous instincts of those who can afford to burn paper – that is, just about everyone. The burlesque exuberance of some recent activity may be dismissed as the froth on top of a wave of extraordinarily rapid economic growth, but a glance not too far backward suggests that the supposedly staid tradition of Chinese ritual observance has for some time now possessed a capacity for unhesitating innovation. On p. 145 we learn that the oldest “ghost bill” in existence dates to May 1923. Yet contemporary writing on China’s currency, for example by E. Kann, suggests that at this point banknotes played a significant part in this-worldly affairs only in certain areas of China, and in Kann’s words metallic currencies were still “the backbone of the system” even some years later. The bias in Western writing on Chinese ritual practice has been to see it as if not superstition then at least as “surviving.” Perhaps it was, and is, capable of doing better than that. At any rate the lifeworld described by C. Fred Blake is one that needs to be taken seriously as part of the larger world of today, not as a nostalgic hangover from a more stable and now regretted past. I hope this book finds many readers, whether their interests lie in the burning of money or not.

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*A Story of Ruins: Presence and Absence in Chinese Art and Visual Culture*

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*A Story of Ruins* is a great contribution to the understanding of visual articulations of remembrance and nostalgia in Chinese visual art, a subfield that gained momentum with the recurrent presence of demolition and debris in Chinese contemporary art. As Wu Hung’s pioneering efforts (as curator, scholar and critic) evidence, the subject offers some conceptual difficulties, the major being how should ruination be situated

in relation to an aesthetic tradition that allegedly had not indulged in ruins, either for the material (preference for ephemeral timber structures) or the symbolic (perceived continuity of history/culture) conditions of Chinese art.

The present book engages with these and many other issues by bringing together previously scattered writings by the author and further original research. Scholars of Chinese studies and art will find numerous, and often uncharted, illuminating examples and conceptual frameworks, and will enjoy Wu's capacity to draw connections and single out specific responses to remembrance. Whereas the brief contextualization and multiple images punctuating the text aid the navigation and enjoyment of a general readership, scholars from other disciplines and areas will surely take part in the global dialogue proposed by Wu, and the potential lines of research opened by the book (for example, are there similarities between the *qiu* that covers/signals a tomb and Middle Eastern *tells*?)

Expanding from the title, Wu Hung works towards a double aim. A first conceptual engagement is with the term "ruins," for which Wu provides an alternative conceptualization "beyond a conventional pictorial or illustrative mode" (p. 19). Chapter one uncovers visual articulations in ancient painting of *huaigu* ("reflections on the past") sentiment around visual tropes like *qiu* 丘, *xu* 墟, or *ji* 迹, and underscores parallelisms between practices like stele rubbing, pilgrimages and antiquarianism, and the European ruin tradition. By setting apart representations of monuments like steles (undamaged indexes of abstract, ontological history) from withered and half-torn trees (*ku shu*) that display "a sense of natural decay, death and rebirth" (p. 40), Wu productively and with great insight unpacks multiple vectors of meaning around ruins and their paradoxical nature – to preserve the unpreserved. Connecting with Buddhism and scholarly citations, the book achieves to open a space for ruins away from Christian eschatology and European mimetic tradition.

As for the second purpose of the book, occupying chapters two and three, Wu traces the story of the introduction of European ruin imagery in China, starting at the moment when Chinese art "ceased to be a self-contained cultural system and was brought into a global circulation of images, mediums and visual technology" (p. 95). According to the author, photography and realist painting turned ancient modes of *huaigu* into "physical and representational" ones (p. 112). The itinerary spans from the picturesque drawings of William Alexander during the Macartney embassy to anti-Japanese ruins of artists like Gao Jianfu in chapter two, and journeys along the 20th century to examine, in the last chapter, the most recent representations of demolition in contemporary artists. "The Birth of Ruins" in China, as chapter two is unambiguously titled, is described as a process of internalization that achieved great artistic productivity in the 1980s, when ruins were claimed as a powerful symbol by artists of the *Stars* group and poets around the magazine *Jintian*, and also at the turn of the century, when avant-garde artists produced fascinating responses to the alienation ensuing from widespread urban renovation.

The main weakness of the book has to do with its methodological structure: if Chinese artists, from ancient times up to Shitao, commanded an array of conceptual and visual resources to evoke times passed, these should have featured in the tale of how Chinese artists received, negotiated and appropriated Western ruin images. Instead, Wu fails to address the possible continuities of ancient, local concepts and practices in modern artworks, and offers an exclusively foreign genealogy for modern ruins, even though the book is filled with works that seemingly echo, across centuries, visual tropes like the "living ruins" of withered trees, or the human embodiment of ruination. His story, while it gestures towards the transnational negotiation of meaning via Lydia Liu's "super-signs," understands modernity as the tabula rasa of

Western imperialism, with the result that it replicates impact-response paradigms, qualified by contemporary historiography, which belittle China's role as a passive reaction and foreclose other possible previous influences (such as Jesuit missionaries).

This long-expected contribution expands Wu's ground-breaking research and will surely become a reference; and yet, an understanding of modern Chinese ruins beyond narratives of national allegory remains open to explore. For all the untrodden paths opened by this outstanding book, and the growing presence of avant-garde Chinese art in international art circuits and markets, Chinese contemporary aesthetics of demolition, with its emphasis on subjective perspectives and stories, asks to be grounded in vernacular practices, experiences and perceptions. This is not the challenge for Chinese ruins alone: as cultural geographer Bradley L. Garret noted about a recently published edited volume on ruins and modernity, research on ruins needs to move beyond visibility and recognize "ruins as places of play, promise, activism, unregulated participation, unexpected memory, and encounters with the uncanny and the sensual" (*Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 2011, volume 2). *A Story of Ruins* provides invaluable materials and a crucial historical awareness to solidly furnish future research of ruins, in China and elsewhere.

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*The Wobbling Pivot: China Since 1800*

PAMELA KYLE CROSSLEY

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With each passing decade, it becomes harder to write a history of modern China. The problem is not merely the accumulation of events, but the proliferation of competing themes. As China seemingly presents a new face to the world in each succeeding decade – as imperialist victim, revolutionary ideologue, pragmatic reformer or energetic entrepreneur – a background must be sought in the recent or not so recent past. The search for modern China is in a sense unending. Pamela Crossley is both honest and straightforward when she writes: "This book has put the pieces of Chinese history since roughly 1800 into a shape that makes sense to me. Nevertheless, I have attempted to supply the reader with sufficient pieces that he or she may rearrange them if the need to create a more sensible shape is felt" (p. ix), and she is as good as her word. The book she has produced is organized around a singular perception of modern Chinese history, but it offers a thorough and engaging narrative that provides the detail necessary for teaching and learning.

What is most intriguing about this volume is its vision of what has remained constant in the past two hundred years in China. The book is not about rebellion ("not a major theme here" [p. 16]), or, for that matter, revolution. Nor is it foreign imperialism that drives the story here, although the episodes of Sino-foreign interaction that punctuated China's history are richly and thoughtfully told. Rather, a "small paradigm of arousal and pacification" underlies the story. The arousal is from the people. From earliest times, Crossley writes, Chinese governments have been confronted by protest from elites and masses, and have responded with measures of repression and appeasement appropriate to the scale of the event. Chinese government, today as in the past, is thus neither democracy nor despotism, but a field of negotiations

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