

INTRODUCTION
CHINA VISUALISED: WHAT STORIES DO PICTURES TELL?

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'Images [are] made meaningful and understood within the very relations of their production and sited within a wider ideological complex, which must, in turn, be related to the practical and social problems which sustain and shape it'¹

How does China project its image in the world? Why and how has the world come to form certain impressions of the Chinese and their way of life? These are issues that preoccupy Chinese citizens in the globalising twenty-first century as they travel overseas, riding on the crest of the country's newly acquired economic power.

This history of image making, implicated simultaneously in Western and Chinese practices, bears much relevance to Chinese images in today's world. When the first Westerners arrived in China, camera in tow, in the mid-nineteenth century, they had become, we might argue, the first actors in the modern production of Chinese images in the world. The visualisation of China, however, was not just the work of Westerners. Even more importantly, with the help of newly acquired visualising technologies, the Chinese became active participants in their own visualisation. Modern Chinese visual practices began with the use of the camera, but various practices of photography took place within the context of a vibrant visual culture with its established norms and conventions. In this way, the camera not only produced new images but also initiated new practices of Chinese visualisation.

A comprehensive history of the modern visualising of China inevitably impinges upon a full range of issues stemming from the global circulation of capital, power and technology since the nineteenth century. Such a history is an ambitious intellectual enterprise. To date, scholars have accomplished much by way of deep empirical studies on discreet aspects pertaining to it. In this volume, the authors join forces to launch a broader inquiry aimed at a synergistic understanding of that larger story. This is

¹ John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 188–9.

underscored by a fundamental question: how can historians use visual documents as sources for research and analysis? The essays here cluster around several nodal points (including photographs, advertisements, posters and movies), spanning from the 1840s to the 1960s. This volume aims to present the in-depth findings of expert studies and to identify emerging questions for further research.

On the eve of the British assault on Zhenjiang in July 1842, two Englishmen set up a daguerreotype camera on the banks of the Yangzi. This moment, recorded by a 14 year old, inaugurated a century of the camera in China (Bickers, chap. 1). Two things were notable about this moment. First, the two were in possession of the rather expensive and new invention within the first years of its availability in Paris and London. Second, it was as the secretary and the surgeon of the mission to conclude the Treaty of Nanjing that they brought their new toys to China. After the daguerrotype, other Europeans would bring the calotype, the collodion wet and dry plate processes, the Kodak revolution, the autochromes, the Kodachrome slides and so on—all within the first years of their appearance in the West. With these cameras, Western travellers made their China photographs: pictures that were taken of China or of Chinese subjects. It is widely recognised that these pictures had a significant part to play in Western representations of China.

Yet, representation began before the introduction of the camera. The place of the visual in Chinese society in the late Qing was far from insignificant. Objects, images and written texts circulated or were displayed quite extensively to convey official and commercial messages (posters, signs, billboards), to support religious practices (flyers, booklets), or to commemorate events (banners, statues). Modernity, in the forms that came on the heels of Western intrusion in the mid-nineteenth century, set the path toward reshuffling past practices and injecting new patterns of visual politics.² Technology played a crucial role, especially printing technologies that introduced new forms of communication (newspapers, magazines) and multiplied the physical supports that reached ever-expanding groups in the population.³ Changes in commercial customs—modern advertising was a major ingredient—also fuelled the nascent

² The line of analysis in this section owes much to the work of Wen-hsin Yeh, *Shanghai Splendor* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 63–8.

³ For a solid introduction, see Rudolf Wagner ed., *Joining the global public: word, image, and city in early Chinese newspapers, 1870–1910* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007).

'pictorial turn' that would bloom a few decades later with the help of another crucial technology: photography.

Cities were the major foci of this transformation, both as sites of production of visual forms and sites of consumption. Up to the 1850–60s, commercial streets were lined with colourful shop signs and banners which represented the main commercial visual language, although characters also figured prominently.⁴ With the advent of the mechanical press, austere missionary journals and pamphlets opened the way to the rise of a wide range of periodicals and newspapers which, for their economic survival, actively sought income from advertising. This became a standard feature of the Chinese and foreign press, with entire pages devoted to commercial publicity. The capacity of the mechanical press for quick and cheap reproduction opened new markets, e.g. the printing of *cartes de visite*, with a portrait of the owner or postcards featuring photographs of landscapes, celebrities, monuments, and so on.⁵ The combination of printing technologies, commercial innovations and urbanisation created a new nexus of visual artefacts that drove the demand and supply of images in the public space.

Yet it was not just the press that made an impact. Improved technology also brought colour, which found its way into a variety of products such as elegantly printed boxes for cigarettes, matches, soap, drugs, etc. What photography could not yet achieve in print—a truthful and legible image—was within the reach of the artists' drawings and paintings at all levels. For advertising purposes, drawings and colour paintings would long occupy the forefront, in eye-catching almanacs, calendar posters and, of course, advertising posters for all kinds of products: cigarettes, soap, stationery, flour, drugs and cosmetics.⁶ Yet photography slowly started to make its way into printed matter, from photographs pasted on a page to actual printing.⁷ Despite the low quality of early photographic images,

⁴ Yi Feng, "Shop signs and visual culture in Republican Peking", *European Journal of East Asian Studies*, 6, 1 (2007), 103–28.

⁵ Régine Thiriez, "Photography and Portraiture in Nineteenth-Century China", *East Asian History*, 17–18 (1999), 77–102.

⁶ Ellen Johnston Laing, *Selling Happiness: calendar posters and visual culture in early twentieth-century Shanghai* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004).

⁷ On early photography in China, see Oliver Moore, "Zou Boqi on vision and photography in nineteenth-century China", *The human tradition in modern China*, eds. Kenneth Hammond and Kristin Stapleton (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008), 33–54. Terry Bennet, *History of photography in China: Western photographers, 1861–1879* (London: Quaritch, 2010). *Brush & shutter: early photography in China*, eds. Jeffrey Cody and France Terpak (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2011).

journals succeeded in creating new expectations among readers by the sheer novelty of photography, but also for the window it offered on the world outside. By the turn of the century, photographs had become a common feature in most journals (though not yet newspapers). Over the latter half of the nineteenth century, the visual vocabulary and grammar that permeated Chinese society in the cities underwent a radical transformation.

A new phase of Chinese visual culture emerged in the 1920s, again thanks to a combination of factors: improved technology that allowed the widespread use of photography, a higher degree of commercialisation and consumption, and political events that heightened the mobilisation of visual resources in support of various political and military agendas. Apart from the more generalised use of pictures in the press, both general and professional, a major change was the rise of illustrated journals—e.g. *Liangyou huabao*, *Beiyang huabao*—that reflected new sensibilities in an urban society that craved signs and symbols of modernity.⁸ Illustrated journals covered everything from everyday life to dignitaries and celebrities, from mechanical devices to natural aberrations. The 1920s also saw the establishment of several Chinese movie-making companies, which initiated a long battle for a singular place under the powerful onslaught of foreign films by Western majors.⁹ Beyond entertainment, however, visual politics also played out on the political stage. Chinese protest movements, as well as government attempts to rally the population around its goals, fed unbridled creativity—even if a large part of these material traces are lost for good.¹⁰ The War of Resistance against Japan represented yet another powerful moment when all individuals and state organisations used visual tools and documents to heighten national pride and resistance.¹¹ The harnessing of artists and visual technologies during wartime was not something specific to China, although it had an exceptionally deep and enduring impact. If cinema came to be embroiled in politics, filmmakers and movie

⁸ Leo Oufan Lee, “The cultural construction of modernity in urban Shanghai”, *Becoming Chinese. Passages to Modernity and Beyond*, ed. Wen-hsin Yeh (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 31-58

⁹ Zhen Zhang, *An amorous history of the silver screen: Shanghai cinema, 1896-1937* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

¹⁰ The best introduction to the production and use of posters for political purposes in China, including the Republican period, is Stefan Landsberger's online collection *Chinese Posters. Propaganda, politics, history, art* [<http://chineseposters.net>].

¹¹ Chang-tai Hung produced the first monograph that highlighted these issues. Chang-tai Hung, *Chinese popular culture during the Sino-Japanese war, 1937-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

companies remained, by and large, geared toward producing films that first and foremost addressed public expectations for entertainment. Politics played an explicit role only within a small group of dedicated film directors. Motion pictures eventually added one final visual layer through which Chinese society before 1949 could see, imagine and reinvent itself.

Cultural critics regularly see the colonial gaze in pre-1949 pictures. For any study of the modern visualisation of China, the China photographs offer a convenient and suitable starting point in terms of both themes and chronology. This volume opens with a collection of essays that consider European China photographs (Part I), which in turn lays the foundation for a broader consideration of modern-day practices in the visualising of China, and the role of the Chinese in these activities (Part II). It is significant that the nineteenth century saw in China not only a quick Chinese adoption of the camera, but also the rise of Chinese photography in response to European practices. In Part II the authors move beyond the Europeans to take into account other forms of Chinese visualising, paying special attention to modern Chinese practices in the visualisation of things Chinese.

The camera in China, to be sure, is of interest beyond merely the making of a history of Chinese photography. Photography spurred the rise of commercial publishing in China in the first half of the twentieth century. It was also central to the advancement of the advertising industry and of photo-journalism. An enhanced capacity to visualise and to reproduce these framed images was central to a new form of urban communication in the first half of the twentieth century. Yet, by the third quarter of the century and under a socialist economy, propaganda posters displaced photographs as the leading genre in public circulation. In the 1960s, China experienced an explosion in the mechanical reproduction of pictorial images as billions of propaganda posters went into circulation. Cultural Revolution posters, no less than European China photographs, came to fashion Western images of the Chinese world.

There were multiple genres of pictorial productions in China's twentieth century, which constitute the subject in Part III. The privileging of pictures over texts in the propaganda posters raises questions about the latter's intended audiences. In contrast to earlier times, the less educated in China's agrarian hinterland appeared by the 1960s to have been successfully drawn into a print culture of political edification. In addition to posters, Chinese movies gained viewership in the cities as well as in the countryside. How moving pictures told stories—whether in defiance of or in conformity to established narrative conventions of earlier days—is the subject of study in Part IV.

THE CHINA FIELD AND THE VISUAL FIELD

A main task of this volume is to explore and experiment with the use of visual documents in pre-modern and modern Chinese history. Historians, we argue, have generally overlooked these sources in their approach to history. This is not to deny that, for the last decade or so, visual documents have indeed found their way into historical inquiry. Yet historians 'still overwhelmingly depend on text-based archives, although interdisciplinary research projects, conferences, and publications in the last ten years indicate a "visual turn" in the scholarship'.¹² A large body of literature now exists on the relationship between images and text. For the most part, however, historians are still working on devising appropriate methodologies and integrating visual documents into their source base. A few solid monographs have established the relevance of taking visual sources as core historical material, though in many cases through the study of a given set of images or photographs.¹³ An even smaller number of historians have devoted their attention and energy to using movies, especially feature films, as a point of entry into the past. The expanding field of film studies, however, is no substitute for historical research.¹⁴

Historical narratives proceed differently whether in still images or movies. Photos do not narrate in and of themselves. One needs to explore the voice behind the images, to delve into the memories they may trigger, and to re-contextualise them in the more or less lengthy afterlife they enjoyed

¹² Sarah Farmer, "Going Visual: Holocaust Representation and Historical Method", *The American Historical Review*, 115, 1 (2010), 116.

¹³ James R. Ryan, *Picturing empire. Photography and the visualization of the British empire* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1997). Maurice Aghulon, *Marianne au combat. L'imagerie et la symbolique républicaines de 1789 à 1880* (Paris: Flammarion, 1979). H elene Puiseux, *Les Figures de la guerre. Repr esentations et sensibilit es, 1839-1996* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997). Christian Delage, *La v erit  par l'image. De Nuremberg au proc s Milosevic* (Paris: Deno l, 2006).

¹⁴ Beyond the ground-breaking work of Marc Ferro, *Cinema and History* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988), see Robert Rosenstone's milestone contributions in the following publications: *Visions of the past: the challenge of film to our idea of history* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995); "History in images/history in words: reflections on the possibility of really putting history onto film", *The American Historical Review*, 93, 5 (1988), 1173-85; "A history of what has not yet happened", *Rethinking History*, 4, 2 (2000), 183-92; "Does a filmic writing of history exist?", *History and Theory*, 41 (2002), 134-44; "October as History", *Rethinking History*, 5 (2001), 255-74; "The reel Joan of Arc: reflections on the theory and practice of the historical film", *The Public Historian*, 25, 3 (2003), 61-77; "JFK: Historical fact/Historical film", *The American Historical Review*, 97, 2 (1992), 506-11.

beyond the time and place in which they were produced.¹⁵ This is a fertile field that should interest China historians, either as a type of source and discourse, or as a potential instrument for the expression of historical knowledge. It is possible to unfold a narrative from one image; this may not solve a historical issue but it will help question both how this photograph came into the hands of the historian, and how it facilitates the investigation of a historical question. With movies—which create a world of fiction and elaborate intricate narratives—the historian needs to filter his own inquiry and insert the visual document into its appropriate social context. In this way historians begin to address works of representation, with embodied viewers and responses, rather than merely seeing transparent reflections of a fictional ‘real’. They work through the visual primary materials and the long trail of added texts and sub-texts, including their own, to generate a new degree of reading history filtered from the multi-layered traces of the past.

In the field of Chinese studies, a few scholars in literary studies or art history have made stimulating forays into the use of visual studies with works that try to reconstruct the ‘visual culture’ of various periods and places.¹⁶ Art historians have, of course, been at the forefront of the trend—visual studies—that has come to dominate scholarly debate among the specialists of Western cultures.¹⁷ In a strikingly parallel movement, a group of young scholars has started to examine Chinese cinema from a variety of angles, though few from a historical perspective, except with cinema itself

¹⁵ H. Bach, “The place of the photography in visual narrative research”, *Afterimage*, 29, 3 (2001), 7.

¹⁶ Craig Clunas, *Empire of great brightness: visual and material cultures of Ming China, 1368–1644* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007). Sarah Elizabeth Fraser, *Performing the visual: the practice of Buddhist wall painting in China and Central Asia, 618–960* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004). Wu Hung and Katherine R. Tsiang, *Body and face in Chinese visual culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2005). Eugene Yuejin Wang, *Shaping the Lotus Sutra: Buddhist visual culture in medieval China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005). Laing, *Selling happiness*. Jason Kuo ed., *Visual culture in Shanghai 1850s–1930s* (Washington DC: New Academia Publishing, 2007).

¹⁷ The major references in the field of ‘visual culture’ are John A. Walker and Sarah Chaplin, *Visual Culture: An Introduction* (Manchester, 1997). Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall eds., *Visual culture: The reader* (London: Sage, 1999). Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Visual Culture Reader* (London: Routledge, 1999). Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). Barnard Malcolm, *Approaches to Understanding Visual Culture* (New York: Palgrave, 2001). Richard Howells, *Visual Culture* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003). Vanessa R. Schwartz and Jeannene M. Przyblyski, *The Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture Reader* (London: Routledge, 2004). Margaret Dikovitskaya, *Visual Culture. The Study of the Visual after the Cultural Turn* (London: The MIT Press, 2005).

as an object of history.¹⁸ The present volume includes contributions by Paul Pickowicz and Poshek Fu, two major initiators and proponents of this line of scholarly research.¹⁹ Given the vast and complex landscape of visuality in pre-modern and modern China, the steps taken so far beg for a more systematic and thorough involvement, especially among historians, to tackle the issues of visual representation and visual documents in Chinese history.²⁰

¹⁸ For histories of cinema, see Yingjin Zhang, *Cinema and urban culture in Shanghai, 1922–1943* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999). Laikwan Pang, *Building a new China in cinema: the Chinese left-wing cinema movement, 1932–1937* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002). Zhen Zhang, *An amorous history of the silver screen*. Film studies tend to dominate with works by Yingjin Zhang, *Screening China: critical interventions, cinematic reconstructions, and the transnational imaginary in contemporary Chinese cinema* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Center for Chinese Studies, 2002). Sheldon H. Lu, *Transnational Chinese Cinemas: identity, nationhood, gender* (University of Hawaii Press, 1997). Zhen Zhang, *The urban generation: Chinese cinema and society at the turn of the twenty-first century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007). Paul Pickowicz, *From underground to independent: alternative film culture in contemporary China* (Lanham Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).

¹⁹ Paul Pickowicz, “The Theme of Spiritual Pollution in Chinese Films of the 1930s”, *Modern China*, 17, 1 (1991), 38–75. Paul Pickowicz, “Cinema and Revolution in China”, *American Behavioral Scientist*, 17, 3 (1974), 328–59. Paul Pickowicz, “Never-Ending Controversies: The Case of *Chun jiang yi hen* (Remorse in Shanghai) and Occupation-era Chinese Filmmaking”, *Images in History: Pictures and Public Space in Modern China*, eds. Christian Henriot and Wen-hsin Yeh (Berkeley: IEAS Research Monograph, 2012, 143–62. Poshek Fu, *The Cinema of Hong Kong: history, arts, identity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000). Poshek Fu, *Between Shanghai and Hong Kong: the politics of Chinese cinemas* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003). See also Anne Kerlan, “The Making of Modern Icons: Three Actresses of the Lianhua Film Company”, *European Journal of East Asian Studies*, 6, 1 (2007), 43–73 and “The Enemy is Coming: The 28th January 1932 Attack on Shanghai in Chinese Cinema”, *Images in History: Pictures and Public Space in Modern China*, eds. Christian Henriot and Wen-hsin Yeh (Berkeley: IEAS Research Monograph, 2012, 163–90.

²⁰ Christian Henriot and Wen-hsin Yeh eds., *Images in History: Pictures and Public Space in Modern China* (Berkeley: IEAS Research Monograph, 2012). Larissa Heinrich, *The afterlife of images: translating the pathological body between China and the West*, Duke University Press, 2008. Rana Mitter, “Picturing Victory The Visual Imaginary of the War of Resistance, 1937–1947”, *European Journal of East Asian Studies*, 7, 2 (2008), 167–92. Xavier Paulès, “Anti-Opium Visual Propaganda and the Deglamorisation of Opium in China, 1895–1937”, *European Journal of East Asian Studies*, 7, 2 (2008): 229–62. Barbara Mittler, “Gendered Advertising in China: What History do Images tell?”, *European Journal of East Asian Studies*, 6, 2 (2007), 13–41. Yi Feng, “Shop signs”. Robert Bickers, “Transforming Frank Peasgood. Family photographs and Shanghai narratives”, *European Journal of East Asian Studies*, 6, 2 (2007), 129–42. Catherine Vance Yeh, “Refined Beauty, New Woman, Dynamic Heroine or Fighter for the Nation? Perceptions of China in the Programme Selection for Mei Lanfang’s Performances in Japan (1919), the United States (1930) and the Soviet Union (1935)”, *European Journal of East Asian Studies*, 6, 2 (2007), 75–102. Christian Henriot, “The Shanghai Bund in myth and history: An Essay through Textual and Visual Sources”, *Journal of Modern Chinese History*, 4, 1 (2010), 1–27.

IMAGES, HISTORY AND STORY-TELLING

One of the main implications of the ‘visual turn’ (also dubbed the ‘pictorial turn’ or ‘iconic turn’) has been to challenge historians to look, find, see, and interpret visual sources.²¹ In other words, while the ‘visual turn’ has made historians aware of the weight of visual sources in history, the central challenge is to bind together the disparate, unorganised and unevenly travelled visual repositories of the human past. Another concern has been to probe further into the relationship between the visual, the spoken, and the textual. Yet there is little relevance to posit the problem in terms of hierarchy or dichotomy between text and image, as if they had to be positioned one against the other.²² On the one hand, image and text work together, as images seldom come ‘naked’. Most come bound with a more or less substantial string of words, from a caption or a comment to full text. On the other hand, while it is necessary to address all the facets of an individual picture, taken as historical corpora, images and texts are intrinsically interlocked within the same social apparatus.

This variety notwithstanding, all contributions in this volume speak to each other across time as they address common issues around the social functions and power of images. We find that there is far more complexity within each type of visual source, as each actually offers varying genres, circumstances and purpose of production, modes of circulation, and length of afterlife through time. The diversity and the complementarity of the contributions precisely embody the wealth of perspectives and the nexus of issues that the incorporation of images raises for the historian.

Images are bound to distort history. Images can only seize a moment in time. They divide the past into thin, related slices produced by a wide array of ‘authors’, from the amateur painter, photographer or video-maker to the professionals, press agencies, crew-based television production, to commercial movie making. Yet even within a single individual collection—say Cartier-Bresson—the frozen moment on film becomes immediately removed from its context, from the chain of events in which it initially fit, and the myriads of images produced as a result are like fractals. History comes to be seen through the fractal mirror of the past. The fragmentary

²¹ W.J.T. Mitchell, “The Pictorial Turn”, *ArtForum*, March 1992, 89ff. The “iconic turn” refers to Gottfried Boehm’s work. See “*Jenseits der Sprache? Anmerkungen zur Logik der Bilder*”, *Iconic Turn. Die Neue Macht der Bilder*, eds. Christa Maar and Hubert Burda (Cologne: DuMont Buchverlag, 2004), 28–43.

²² Kristopher Imbrigotta, “History and the Challenge of Photography in Bertolt Brecht’s *Kriegsfiibel*”, *Radical History Review*, 106 (2010), 27.

nature of the visual record introduces chaos and incompleteness. This can be turned to the advantage of the historian. Images, especially photography, function in this context to break history into fragmentary moments so that we might examine its trends, its ruptures, and its subtexts. As 'witness' to real events, images allow time and space to collapse for the viewer.

A picture, once taken, gains a life of its own. The disassociation of the framed from the context of its framing rarely prevents a picture from further circulation. The late nineteenth century saw the issuing of a massive number of postcards. Thanks to the rise of this new platform of reproduction, China photographs, along with many other disembodied pictures, gained a new life as postcards sent around the world (Bourgon, chap. 2). A framed image that had lost its contextual mooring functioned, more often than not, as an open invitation to an abstraction and misrepresentation of its situated meaning. It is a clichéd practice to denounce European China photographs for their embodiment of the colonial gaze. Even when there was no such explicit intention, images could circulate to the point of acquiring an autonomous history—a history increasingly disconnected from the context in which they were produced—to produce a visual and moral representation of the Chinese. Pictures of Chinese decapitations during the Boxers' Uprisings, for instance, circled the globe to incite stereotypical European denunciations of Chinese cruelty. 'Crudely put', writes Robert Bickers, 'a photograph of a European in a rickshaw can be simply taken as an illustration of colonialism and its starkly obvious inequities' (Bickers, chap. 1). A second common and cursory reading of European China photographs was to assume that all pictures were samples of 'colonial' and 'punitive photography' providing a 'negative, colonial view' of a static China of backwardness, barbarism, sickness and poverty.

To restore a picture to its materialised state and its situated place in time, Bickers, Bourgon and Henriot offer three reading strategies. Bickers consults private memoirs of colonial officials to determine exactly how the latter might have used their cameras and photographs while on colonial assignments. He finds that, contrary to general assumptions, not all colonialists were interested in fixing their gaze on the native and the indigenous. Many in fact preferred to cast their glance towards their European homeland: they carried pictures from home and used photography, among other things, to soothe nostalgia.

Bourgon reads an infamous photograph of a Qing execution by decapitation by uncovering an entire sequence of photographs in connection with that particular moment (Bourgon, chap. 2). Furthermore, he consults

archives to determine the identities of the prisoners and the circumstances leading up to their executions. Bourgon shows that, instead of being an instance of Chinese criminal justice as many had assumed, the beheadings were in fact the result of victor's justice meted out by the French against Chinese officials in the aftermath of the Boxers' Uprisings.

While Bickers and Bourgon turn to memoirs and archives to track down notable individuals, Henriot calls upon social profiles and general data to flesh out the generic images of a series of peddlers photographed on the street (Henriot, chap. 3). Henriot convincingly offers a placement of these nameless individuals within their probable social contexts. He thus brings back to life the unnamed faces in the crowd of a bygone era. His reconstruction, in turn, restores materiality to the socially constructed categories in history.

For many foreigners coming to China as more or less long-term residents or as tourists, China offered a strikingly different visual landscape that induced those who owned cameras to record the 'unusual', the 'alien', or the 'exotic'. Most of these pictures were usually buried in family albums, with few remaining extant or even surviving the passage of generations (Bickers, chap. 1). This constitutes a rich reservoir of images, largely devoted to individuals. In such collections, however, one finds the occasional gold nugget. The 'random photographer', therefore, can offer a precious, but rare, visual glimpse into Chinese society. What is missing here are albums of photographs taken by ordinary Chinese. What story would they tell us? What sort of visual testimony would they offer?

For most of those who took pictures in China, especially Western residents or the amateur photographer, one may wonder how much depended on fortuitous encounters and how much on a deliberate choice, even a deliberate creation. For residents, except for a very small number of dedicated 'explorers', the occasional encounter was the rule, even if such encounters resulted also from a familiarity with the local terrain (images of peddlers, beggars, markets). The net result is usually a large degree of uniformity and convention. Exceptional events combined with unusual risk-taking propensities may produce original images, especially when one goes far back in time (Bourgon, chap. 2). Fortuitous encounters were also at the root of much picture taking by professional photographers, whose trained eyes were more apt at reacting to a situation and framing it in a visually significant manner.

Beyond personal commemoration is a less familiar genre: photographs taken for a practical purpose. This genre consists mostly of pictures com-

missioned by companies for advertising or as a way of recording their properties. At a time when photography became a way to assert one's standing, companies were often involved in self-congratulatory editorial projects that promoted the achievements of Westerners in China or Asia.²³ At a more mundane level, companies recorded their properties (workshops, buildings, ships). Often their representatives and employees also came in front of the camera lens. Later the affordability of the camera removed the need for professional photographers. People produced and exchanged pictures as a way to maintain links with the homeland, with those who had remained behind in the hometown: family, friends and colleagues. These circulated images formed an interlocking web of visual memories that were probably viewed by a larger 'public' than just their initial receivers.

One of the great qualities of images lies in their capacity to reveal something that the casual observation of everyday life will miss. While certain moments may be overlooked, with a photograph we have the image and its social significance framed and frozen for scrutiny. One could argue that an image has the capacity not only to describe a situation, but also to offer a viewpoint or even an analysis of that situation. Perhaps precisely because there is no ready-made answer to the questions raised by an image, in the very process of interpreting the viewer becomes involved through both intellect and emotion. Far from delivering a one-sided message, images offer paths to be trodden: juxtaposed, they can convey varying visions of the past and the present.

Images record history.²⁴ Whatever their nature—painting, photograph, movie—they all register a moment in the past. They mark, at the very least, the time when they were produced and may also evoke or depict earlier events or, more rarely, the future. Painting and drawings seem to border more on the side of subjectivity as they represent fictional works, even when the object is a real person or an event. Beyond their value as a work of art embedded in a given period, visual documents such as these can provide clues for historical understanding. The Song dynasty paintings, studied by Ellen Laing Johnston, established the undeniable presence of

²³ Arnold Wright, *Twentieth century impressions of Hongkong, Shanghai, and other treaty ports of China: their history, people, commerce, industries, and resources* (London: Lloyds Greater Britain Pub. Co., 1908). W.H. Morton Cameron, *Present day impressions of the Far East and prominent and progressive Chinese at home and abroad. The history, people, commerce, industries and resources of China, Hongkong, Indo-China, Malaya and Netherlands India* ([London]: Globe Encyclopedia Company, 1917).

²⁴ Eduardo Cadava, *Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

peddlers in Chinese cities, and tools and devices similar to those caught by nineteenth-century photographers (Henriot, chap. 3).²⁵ The difference, however, related to time and representation. Unless they are manipulated or doctored, photographs show a real moment that corresponds to the exact time when the shutter let light in and left the imprint of an image onto a glass plate, celluloid film or digital support.

Yet images can also be erased. This occurs when visual documents are lost, discarded or destroyed by their authors, censoring authorities, natural and human disasters, or simply neglect and indifference as a sub-set of materials not yet recognised for their historical value. How many such valuable visual traces were destroyed by individuals during the Cultural Revolution to protect their owners from persecution? How many commercial productions, for instance early movies, were cast aside and left to disintegrate after their release? Partial erasure can also occur: to the extent that photography as a genre is a materialised and situated representation of a discrete moment and place in time, the loss of the context is the loss of the key to its meaning. Going by the prints that are known to have survived to this day, at the very least thousands of European China photographs were taken in the nineteenth century. Yet just as much about this history of photographing has been lost in time. Little information has survived, for example, on the identity of the photographers or the circumstances of their picture taking.

Images also erase history by the very selective process through which things, people or events come to be photographed or filmed. What was captured by the camera developed out of a unique context: the specific needs of the photographer, historical trends, political policies, and so on. For example, in Guangzhou in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, photographers turned their cameras on urban Chinese homes and took many pictures. In an effort to reconstruct the architectural history of these homes, Virgil Ho examines these pictures and compares them with a variety of other pictorial representations (Ho, chap. 5). Photographs of Chinese homes, despite their availability in quantity, do not, Ho concludes, provide sufficient information to offer a comprehensive pictorial description of the various aspects of the familial space. The photographs tended to privilege exterior rather than the interior spaces of the home, and did not generally represent fixed notions of primacy, privacy, and geomancy that were central to traditional concepts of spatial patterns. The camera was of lim-

²⁵ Helen Johnson Laing, "Li Sung and Some Aspects of Southern Sung Figure Painting", *Artibus Asiae* 37, 1/2 (1975), 6–12.

ited value when describing something such as the *qilou*, a hybrid of Chinese and Western features, and was instrumental in its mediation of spatial flow.

Along with questions of interpretation, we must address questions of access. We have not yet explored the vast repositories of images available in archives, libraries, print or private homes. Such image collections, illustrated periodicals and books offer more than a glimmer of hope to historians when examining how images shaped new perceptions and new social figures, with technology making history by working within the established contexts of time and place. For example, Joan Judge shows that with women and photographs, there seemed to be little resistance when the camera came into the lives of late nineteenth-century Chinese women who made their living in the lively quarters of Shanghai (Judge, chap. 4). Courtesans quickly adapted to the idea of the circulation of their photographs in public. There was much greater reservation, in contrast, when elite Chinese women considered having their pictures taken. There was even greater constraint when it came to the public circulation of their photographed images. It required a combination of the positive push of print capitalism and the tacit patronage of familial patriarchs for elite Chinese women to become publicly visible via photographs in print.

Such documentary successes aside, without undue pessimism, there is little chance that visual documents will ever match the quantity and quality of textual records, except for the most contemporary period. This shall not discourage exploring ‘history as a vision’.²⁶ Images create history. They do history. On the one hand, images have a tremendous power over mind and imagination. By virtue of their association with media that made the circulation of images increasingly wide and fast—from printed leaflets to today’s Internet—images represent the largest pool of information that has been reaching people everywhere for decades now. Images shape representations, perceptions and opinions. Some even become iconic representations of an event in a given society or amongst social groups. As Sarah Farmer argues, ‘historians have a role to play in parsing out how precisely we understand the “power of images” by showing how, historically, the visual was made, deployed, and received’.²⁷

After all, even icons fade away. If many Westerners can easily associate Nick Ut’s photograph of a naked Vietnamese girl running for her life with

²⁶ Johan Huizinga, “My path to history”, *Dutch Civilization in the Seventeenth Century and Other essays* (London: Collins, 1968), 269.

²⁷ Sarah Farmer, “Going Visual: Holocaust Representation and Historical Method”, *The American Historical Review*, 115, 1 (February 2010), 117.

the Vietnam War, how many remember H.S. Wong's crying baby on a platform of the Shanghai train station in August 1937 published in *Life Magazine*? Memories are not equally shared across time and place. Though some images enjoy long and unpredictable afterlives—museums may provide a degree of near eternity—all images eventually die.

Why then place so much emphasis on visual sources? Images are meant to impress something on people's minds: an aesthetic pleasure, a commercial or political message, a family memory. What were called images 'with a purpose' invaded modern societies after mechanical printing opened the way to cheap and easy duplication. This was followed by, and accompanied by the rise of new visual technologies (photography, film) and media (television, cinema, Internet). Yet the social import of images in China was not new, and commercial advertising was not a modern invention.

Here, Wu and Lien examine Ming–Qing packaging paper and signboards, and find they relied heavily upon the use of words (Wu & Lien, chap. 6). They ask:

...why was there such a vast difference in the use of images or text between traditional and modern forms of advertising? It might be presumed that literacy rates during the traditional period were below those of the modern era. Why, then, was traditional advertising dense with text while modern advertising emphasised the importance of images?

The authors draw distinctions between a 'passive' form of advertising, 'in that consumers must know where the product can be found or what it consists of before they can see the sign or handbill', and an 'aggressive' form of modern advertising that 'actively insert[ed] itself into people's daily lives' through sheer repetition. Traditional advertising, they argue, waited for 'discovery by consumers'. By doing so it succeeded in preserving the prescribed differentiations in consumer taste drawn on the basis of social status. In contrast, modern-day advertising, as in the pages of *Shenbao*, was instrumental in the promotion of a consumerism that was inclusive of all members of society. The heavy emphasis on pictures in such advertisements was thus a necessary means to reach a literate and an illiterate base of consumption.

To do history means transforming people's values and behaviour, which modern advertising strove to achieve. In an age of globalising capitalism, Barbara Mittler points out, corporations aimed to turn their products into household brands all around the world (Mittler, chap. 7). In Victorian England, 'The consumer identifies with the world itself, discovers a community of interests in the pursuit of consumption'. Similarly, advertising

in Shanghai, if not the products themselves, was within the reach of all. Consumerism may cut across social differences and unite all members of the society. In that sense, modern commercial advertising favoured the use of pictorial images in a drive to reach as many consumers as possible.

There is an entire body of images that explicitly represent constructed discourses. China was of course not immune to the visual ‘technologies’ that developed along with modern printing (and later cinema) on the one hand, and modern political regimes on the other. From this angle, advertising and propaganda represent two poles of mass communication that share the same purpose—to condition people to act and even think in a way that responds positively to the commercial or political interests behind the message. There is definitely a difference and a gap between the two realms as one goes from mere influencing to moulding and shaping minds. Advertisements come as strings of images-*cum*-messages on a given product or service, but taken as a whole they do more than ‘sell’. They contribute to fashion, reorient, or introduce other ways of seeing, of behaving, and even of thinking. Advertisements can constitute parallel landscapes depending on where they are displayed and who they target.

Commercial advertising in the first half of China’s twentieth century, powered by the resources of a nascent market capitalism, paled in volume and scope when set next to the country’s production of political propaganda after mid-century. There was already a long tradition of propaganda imagery in Republican China, mostly due to the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese war, and posters were one of the main mediums for pouring political messages into Chinese society after 1949. Post-1949, however, there was a change of both substance and scale. Of course, revolution brought an abrupt end to most commercial forms of visual expression, especially advertising. Movie production came under the strict control of party committees at all levels with the sole purpose of raising the political consciousness of the labouring masses. In other words, the party-state built an all-encompassing propaganda apparatus that monitored all visual production, from individual art work to mass campaigns. Artists and professionals who once worked for advertising companies had to adapt to the demands of the party.²⁸ The poster industry became the hallmark of Chinese propaganda, creating a broad and powerful visual imaginary of Chinese socialism in the making. At each major phase and for each specific topic, a flurry of new posters invaded the public space, the workplace and even the private

²⁸ Laing, *Selling Happiness*, chap. 10.

home.²⁹ Mao Zedong became a central figure in the flow of images until, by the Cultural Revolution, he eventually stood out as the sole icon of the Chinese revolution.³⁰

The socialist regime drew on all sorts of pre-existing practices (including advertising posters, calendars), which it reframed to suit its plans for creating a new society. Stefan Landsberger, who possesses a large collection of Chinese posters, discusses the production of these posters as well as their consumption (Landsberger, chap. 8). On the production side, the story is familiar: a handful of Chinese government agencies wielded final authority on the publication of Chinese posters. On the consumption end, the story is equally familiar. With an estimated 2.2 billion official Mao portraits printed during the Cultural Revolution, or 'three for every person in the nation', it is safe to say that, as far as the copies of the official image are concerned, few doubts can exist about their consumption: they were bought, distributed, handed out as keepsakes, and found their way onto Chinese walls inside every structure. It is a mystery, of course, of the processes in between: of how artists, paid and commissioned by the state, managed to be innovative within the prescribed frameworks, or of how posters might have met the tastes of the consuming public on the receiving end.

Despite the absence of a marketplace, a whole network of institutions mobilised to sustain the active circulation of the posters. Schools and libraries, at all levels, were at the forefront of this distribution. Other spaces of exhibition included factories, Party offices, army meeting rooms, shop floors, community rooms, and even the art centres of the masses (*qunzhong meishu guan*) in towns and villages. Individuals sometimes received posters as gifts on commemorative occasions. Of the Mao posters, more than 900 million copies of a single design, *Chairman Mao to Anyuan*, were produced (Pang, chap. 9). Villagers sometimes welcomed these portraits on their walls as a source of colour and shape. Propaganda posters sponsored by the state were, to be sure, fundamentally different from commercial advertisements paid for by private businesses. Their rise in the second half of the twentieth century pointed to the parallel existence of multiple genres of visual representations in China, each following its own norms and prac-

²⁹ Stefan Landsberger and Marien van der Heijden, *Chinese posters: the IISH-Landsberger collections* (Munich; New York: Prestel, 2009).

³⁰ Harriet Evans and Stephanie Donald, eds. *Picturing power in the People's Republic of China: posters of the Cultural Revolution* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999). Lincoln Cushing and Ann Tompkins, *Chinese posters: art from the great proletarian cultural revolution* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2007).

tices of visualisation. The posters achieved an even deeper reach within Chinese society than the advertisements.

Propaganda imagery imposed limitations as it came in well-framed pictures with a clearly asserted perspective. The saturation of Chinese society with visual propaganda had an obvious impact on people's minds, as it created a socialist *imaginaire* and an imagined society shared by millions. Their political function notwithstanding, propaganda posters also have an aesthetic value that should not be dismissed. This brings us back to the complex nexus of images: 'The aesthetic aspects of pictorial sources should not be assumed; they need to be accounted for, pinned down and then used in order to complicate the historical reading of the image'.³¹

Movies readily come into this challenging task. Feature films were created for entertainment and pleasure, with filming techniques a crucial aspect of their aesthetics. They were made to tell a story, hence an explicit narrative targeted at the audience, a visual experience far beyond that of looking at a single or group of photograph(s). The plot and the aesthetics, however, do not sum up the particular function of films as historical sources. The story can be entangled in a web of external factors that relate directly to the way in which the film came into production, what the director/company chose to address, the issues that resonated with the society of the time, etc. Women figured prominently in Chinese cinema, not just as actresses of course, but as a motif around which directors repeatedly talked about a changing Chinese society, a real as well as an imagined society, a society to be. Films such as the two studied in this volume were both produced in the post-war period. Through its pungent portrayal of an ordinary Shanghai woman in an extraordinary time of economic crisis and cultural conflict, *Unending Emotions* (a movie based on a Zhang Ailing script), sheds light on gender relationships, middle-class family life, and the intricate politics of Chinese cinema in post-war China (Pickowicz, chap. 10). *Long Live Missus* (another Zhang Ailing script) testifies, with fun and warm irony, to the historical complexity of the female condition and human behaviour in twentieth-century Shanghai (Fu, chap. 11). Both movies resume a never-ended discussion on gender relations, the re-positioning of women, both in the story and in real life. Both contributions convey a remarkable sense of post-war emotions within Chinese urban society.

Images never tell obvious stories despite—or perhaps because of—their immediacy. Like all historical productions—yet with the added danger of

³¹ Lynda Nead, "The History in Pictures", *Cultural and Social History*, 7, 4 (2010), 491.

being perceived as much more readable, even pleasurable—still and moving images demand insight and discernment, perceptivity and observation, empathy and deconstruction. The contributions in this volume seek to probe the politics of the visual representation of China as it came into being in transnational and transcultural form. It also hopes to provide ways through which to reach out to the obscure object of visibility in modern China.