This book is presented as the exploration of a paradox: how one institution—the State Bureau for Letters and Visits—that helped the Communist Party consolidate its power has transformed itself into a space for contestation, how complaint has come to mean protest, and furthermore, how the image of the victim has been transmuted into that of actor.

The authors go over a 56-year period—from 1951, when the Communist Party revived the practice, until 2007—and show how the relationship has gradually been remoulded to resemble an inversion of the domination position, as hinted in the book’s title: “ruses of democracy.” Although the authors stress that the petitioners never completely took up the authorities’ injunctions, they show how the institution helped the Party orchestrate the “tales of bitterness” that lay behind the 1950s agrarian reforms; only those with a good class background were able to pronounce themselves in the name of the ethical principles and policies underlying class struggle and to denounce those belonging to social categories targeted for elimination. In other words, the authors show how manipulation of petitioners’ stands led to physical violence, helped to redefine the social and political order, and strengthened the Party’s authority. During the 1950s, even though the Party would have wished to use the administration of letters and visits as “a springboard to mass movements through the decades,” in reality the institution “did not constitute a major tool of class struggle” (pp. 128-129), the authors show. While this function was indeed present, the analysis of petitions reveals that what concerned the petitioners most consistently was, above all, local cadres’ abuse of power, and that the formulation of these denunciations did not necessarily follow the ideological guidelines of the era. Similarly, during the 1980s, while the new leadership sought to use this institution to orchestrate the campaign to rehabilitate “rightists,” the petitions often referred to events before the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), not stopping at describing the political manipulations they were subject to but also including “recurring actions, ideological contradictions, and structural problems” (p. 199). Such expression has always overshot the limits the Party sought to impose. At the end of the book, the authors say that recourse to the office of letters and visits constitutes “one initiative among many in a long and difficult collective action during which individuals combine different resources to express their sense of injustice and obtain a response” (p. 250). All social classes are taking advantage of this institution; the authors stress that contrary to widely held belief, not only the lower classes but also investors, administrators, political cadres, and property owners are also using it. Grievances fall into two main categories: “problems left over from history” and “current problems,” mainly seizure of agricultural land, urban demolition and expropriation, the functioning of judicial institutions, enterprise restructuring and labour rights, and environmental problems. The authors conclude that the way in which petitions use this procedure “directly contributes to state formation” (p. 416) by forcing the party to reform the administration of letters and visits through investing it with greater transparency and efficiency; in other words, by encouraging the invention of “new procedures and new uses” and by directly influencing political action, pressuring the authorities to adopt policies better geared to popular expectations.

Evolution of the space for expression, with the major turning point having come in the early 1980s, is dealt with in the book’s second part and may be summarised as follows: the end of restrictions with regard to who may or may not avail of this institution following the abolition of class struggle, the appearance of new normative references such as laws to which peti-
Petitioners refer more and more precisely, and expansion of the previously highly restricted and codified space for expression thanks to the emergence of conveniences encouraged by the Party, such as telephone hotlines or newspaper columns devoted to petitions, as well as the new role played by the media in relaying petitioners’ demands. In other words, the authors show how this initially private and confidential space became a semi-public one, gradually emerging as the epicentre of collective action. In line with the work of Kevin O’Brien and Li Lianjiang, they stress that there has been an increase in collective visits and in the number of participants, and politicisation of rising demands made to higher-level administrations even as “the authorities are addressed in a more direct manner than earlier and on an unprecedented level of equality,” with external pressure also being brought to bear on the authorities.

The words “ruses of democracy” in the title refers to the author’s thesis that quite beyond individual petitions, one factor at work historically is an underlying “process of democratic invention” (p. 434). Petitioners have now shed the informer or accuser status assigned to them in the 1950s, albeit without recognition of their victimhood. Far from being passive, the petitioners express their capacity to affirm the moral and political bearings to which they ask leaders to conform. Forms of democratic practice are indeed emerging in China in the guise of surveillance or prevention, challenging a judgment, and in sum “organising defiance,” which, the authors stress — taking the Pierre Rosenvallion line of thinking — only strengthens the current political leadership’s legitimacy. (1) The book’s major strength, which qualifies it as a milestone in sociological studies on China, is its detailed analysis of the emergence, structuring, and dynamics of this new political space. But it would be advisable to exercise great caution in applying the term democracy to an authoritarian system, and to its ins and outs, especially when it comes to the administration of letters and visits, at the risk of losing one’s bearings. It concerns the primary meaning of the word democracy, which immediately leads to a contradictory debate. The authors ably show that petitioners cannot confront the authorities to whom they look for resolution of their problem. The term “democracy” evokes the concept of people’s power, especially the power to decide, which still remains indisputably and unchallenged in the party’s hands. Whatever its modalities, petitioning is always an approach to a superior entity, which even in the face of popular pressure retains its discretionary power on both the resolution of problems petitioners bring to the bureau and on determining the parameters for this “democratic participation,” which has officially become a priority since the 17th Party Congress. It shows the way in which the Party has resumed charge of this bureau, notably by systematically sending petitions addressed to the central government down to local administrations that had already failed to find a solution, and looking on as local authorities take recourse through arrests and the setting up of “black jails.” Again, as pointed out in Yu Jianrong’s famous report (2005) quoted at length by the authors, nothing is farther from this bureau than the concept of justiciability: most petitions fail, and many petitioners have spent lifetimes, some since the 1980s, lost in the Kafkaesque maze of this bureau and its basically perverse functioning, as brought out dramatically in Zhao Liang’s documentary Petition (Shangfang). For the Party, it is all about channelling popular discontent while using individual petitions to put in place new governance techniques geared to maintaining social stability. What stood out in Yu’s report was its attempt at clarification by proposing that petitions be handled by courts so that the Bureau of Letters and Visits could concentrate entirely on institutionalised “democratic participation.” From an ethical standpoint, it is advisable to beware of the contamination of concepts used by Chinese authorities, because once a normative definition of the term “democracy” is abandoned, the Party will have won out with its own claim of pursuing a democratic path. The authors’ perspective thus appears a trifle idealistic, and their conclusion could have considered the ambiguity in the dynamics of interactions between state authorities and social actors instead of emphasising the petitioners’ power of complaint: of course the scope for complaints has been expanded, but that is mainly due to openings granted by the authorities themselves, especially through the rehabilitation policy adopted in the early 1980s. The book also tends to idealise the role of letters and visits offices in formulating new public policies to meet popular aspirations — notably with regard to changes in the central government policies towards migrants early in the last decade — and generally in state building. Other tools and actors — media, social organisations, scholars, and lawyers — contribute to this process, the agents of change being necessarily numerous and in mutual interaction.

It should be stressed that this is not an attempt to deny that political space could be opening up, with the specific purpose of articulating around negotiation rather than conflict. Nor is it being suggested that such mobilisation would have no political impact in terms of constructing — more precisely rationalising — the state. But what the authors fail to mention is that this mobilisation forms an integral part of the Chinese regime’s functioning, and that the resultant state rationalisation would help the party entrench itself in power — in other words, help explain the authoritarian regime’s adaptability and durability. Recall the work of Olivier Dabène, Vincent Geisser, and Gilles Massardier, the title of whose book Democratic authoritarianisms and authoritarian democracies in the twenty-first century (2) underlines this tendency towards hybridisation of political regimes that characterise the current era. This has less to do with noting the disappearance of ontological difference between authoritarianism and democracy than with promoting a dialectical approach that would do justice to the complexity of regimes by highlighting their own contradictions and gaps in order to show how forms of democracy and authoritarianism are related within the same political regime.

Has the paradox been resolved? Not really: this institution continues to serve the purpose Mao assigned it at its creation in 1951 by remaining “a means of strengthening the people’s links with the Party and with the people’s government,” and this book could also have been subtitled “ruses of bureaucracy.” It is rightly this paradox that lies at the heart of the authoritarian Chinese regime’s functioning, and which the authors fail to bring out sufficiently in choosing to highlight a sociological viewpoint and avoid reflection on the political regime.

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China A Religious State is the published version of a series of lectures given by John Lagerwey at the Chinese University of Hong Kong and the University of Hong Kong around 2008, offering a comprehensive view of the religious dimensions of Chinese state and society throughout its long history as well as in the deep structures of traditional local communities.

The book is immensely rich in its breadth and in the profusion of historical and ethnographic details offered by one of the very few scholars in the world with a virtually unsurpassed mastery of both classical sinological scholarship on Chinese (and Daoist) religious history as well as the ethnography of local ritual and society. Indeed, Lagerwey, who has just retired as the holder of the prestigious Chair of Daoism and Chinese Religions at the École Pratique des Hautes Études, and is now a Professor at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, has, as an early collaborator of the renowned Daoist scholar Kristofer Schipper, conducted authoritative studies on the Daoist Canon as well as participant observation of Daoist priests in Taiwan and Fujian. He later initiated a wave of local ethnographies and folklore studies in Southeast China, publishing more than 30 volumes of field reports and oral histories by local scholars he has trained and nurtured. Most recently, he has been editing a monumental history of Chinese religion, with substantial contributions by virtually all of the world’s leading scholars in the field.

China: A Religious State draws on this massive body of research; though short, the book is so replete with historical, ritual, and ethnographic detail that the reader may easily get lost in the thick jungle of Chinese religion, losing sight of the big picture. Such is, perhaps, one of the objectives of the book – to show that not only is the conventional intellectual view of China (whether Chinese or Western) of a civilisation in which religion is but a marginal dimension completely false, but that this religious dimension is so astonishingly rich and diverse that it cannot be reduced to any simple statement or formulation. Reading China: A Religious State, we realise that if materials on China had been available to Sir James George Frazer over a century ago, he could easily have doubled the length of his Golden Bough!

It would be impossible to summarise this detail in a brief review; I will limit myself to raising some questions or musings that arose to me after reading each chapter of the book.

The Introduction argues that “China is a religious state and Chinese society is a religious society.” China is a sacred space traditionally conceived as a “continent of spirits” (shenzhou 神州), a notion that should not be treated as a “mere” metaphor. It is now known that the image of a rational, non-religious Chinese civilisation derives from the Jesuit project of marrying Christianity with a secularised Confucianism – but Lagerwey focuses here on the Confucians’ alliance with the Jesuits and their participation in their deception. He argues that modernity began when symbol and reality were separated, when the Protestant reformation asserted that the sacraments are “nothing but symbols” or “mere metaphor,” devoid of intrinsic spiritual power. Lagerwey reminds us that the idea of ritual as “nothing but” symbolism dates back to Xunzi and Confucius, who advocated that ritual should be practiced to regulate the emotions, “as if” the spirits of the ancestors were present, but not truly believing so (p. 3). When the Jesuits arrived in the mid sixteenth century, Ming neo-Confucianism was in full swing and “the neo-Confucian elite had its own project, namely, to transform society by ridding it of the rituals of shamans, Buddhists, and Daoists, and putting Confucian rituals in their place” (p. 3). Thus, “neo-Confucian rationalism” was ready to “make a deal” with “Thomist rationalism” as part of its project of replacing China’s gods with neo-Confucian ancestor worship. Lagerwey thus argues that the Jesuit-Confucian encounter was the meeting of two distinct and unwitting secularising tendencies, one of which, the Chinese, had been advancing for 2,000 years.

This begs the question, however, of why, after 2,000 years, the Confucian rationalising project had made so little progress by the time the Jesuits arrived – we now know that China, in late imperial times, was an intensely religious society, as this book demonstrates. Perhaps the answer lies in the fact that, while Confucian learning urged the gentleman to participate in rituals as if the ancestors or gods were present, they did not object to the common people believing that the ancestors and spirits are really present, and regulating their behaviour accordingly – yi shendao shejiao 以神道祭祀. Thus, under Chinese orthopraxy, rituals should be maintained, and what is important is to participate, with the freedom to consider them either magically efficacious or “merely” symbolic and socially functional. While, thus, the secularising tendency is always present in Confucianism, the secularising rupture is always absent. Hence the modern perplexity about whether or not Confucianism is or is not religious/a religion. The Western experience, however, has been one of radical ruptures – first, as Lagerwey notes, differences of understanding and belief about the possibility or not of the “transubstantiation” of the bread and wine could not be tolerated among the participants of the same ritual service, so that separate and warring Catholic and Protestant churches were needed – and later, again, as atheists and religious believers could not participate together in the same rituals, entirely distinct and opposed institutions and ideologies had to be created for the “religious” and the “non-religious.” The apparent affinities between Jesuit and Confucian rationalism thus mask a substantive difference, which hinges on the Confucian acceptance of ambiguity, ambivalence, and indeterminacy in the name of social harmony.

Chapter One, “A Brief History of the Pantheon: Ancestors and Gods in State and Local Religion and Politics,” presents a rapid overview, from pre-imperial to late imperial times, of state-religion relations in China. One focus is on the Chinese rulers’ deity worship, noting how, with each new regime or dynasty, or sometimes with the accession of a new emperor, the ruler made significant modifications to the religious system, often sacrificing to different deities and supporting some deities and sects while suppressing others, who may have been favoured by the previous ruler. As Lagerwey argues, in China, “state=church” (p. 49), and “from the Shang ancestors to the Longmen sect, this is a constant feature in Chinese religious history: it is dominated by political decisions” (p. 54).
In their formation of religio-political alliances, providing a common but multivocal ritual and symbolic language for working through their relationships. In chapters Three and Four, “Festivals in Southeastern China” and “On the Rational Character of Chinese Religion,” we are treated to a cornucopia of ethnographic tidbits drawn from dozens of villages, towns, county seats, and mountain temples. Faced with the bewildering diversity of material, Lagerwey concludes that “The first observation to be made of this material concerns its richness, the second its unity.”

How can we make sense of both the unity and diversity of these local festivals? A few thoughts come to my mind: on the one hand, all of these popular customs are rooted in the same Chinese cosmology and “demonological paradigm,” to use Barend J. ter Haar’s formulation: the festivals have both a life-affirming, life-generating function and an exorcistic or prophylactic function of protecting the community from ghosts and demons, which are associated with the dangerous world outside the community. Local deities have an intimate connection to the demonic realm: sometimes former demons themselves, they know how to fight the evil forces. Hence, they make good allies for communities in search of a protector. But, lest they remain too close to the wild and demonic ways, they also need to be firmly anchored to the realm of order and civilisation – hence the attempts of both Daoism and the imperial state to integrate them into their pantheons and ritual systems. I have suggested that the “cult” of a Chinese deity should be seen as a reciprocal, gifting alliance between a human group and the deity, in which both parties are seen as having some power over the other. On the side of the human groups, we see, as Lagerwey points out, the sophisticated methods by which, through the festivals of the deities, they organise their reciprocal, gifting alliance between a human group and the deity, in which both parties possess, maintain, and exchange power (see forthcoming work by Adam Chau). A Chinese deity is a nexus of social relations, a node of spiritual powers related to place, and a materialised body of narratives and memories – all linked to at least one organised interest group in society. Thus, the emperor’s sacrifice to a deity would be the ritual construction and maintenance of a political alliance with this network of powers. Imperial sovereignty is thus maintained by keeping itself at the centre of a vast system of localised networks of powers. With a new dynasty or regime, new networks of power need to be established – this might partially involve retaining portions of the old regime’s network, but also partially involve creating a new one. Which deities and sects would rise or fall in this process would be the result of the give and take between powers and interests. While we tend to conceive of the political game as a negotiation between humans, in China it might be useful to see the role of deities, rituals, and temples as mediating objects in the political game.

Such a perspective might give us insights on “Daoist Ritual in Social and Historical Perspective,” which is the subject of Chapter Two. Discussing the Daoist Heavenly Masters tradition 道教靈寶派, Lagerwey stresses the oft-noted bureaucratic organisation of the pantheon and the role of the Daoist priest as an official mandated to send forms and petitions on behalf of the people to the relevant offices of the celestial government. Daoist ritual mediates a celestial world of official documents, record-keeping, and lawsuits, combined with a concern with healing and immortality. With the revelation of the Lingbao 靈寶 Canon around AD 400, Mahayana Buddhist concerns about karma, cosmic retribution, and universal salvation are integrated into Daoist ritual, turning it into a “universal religion” (p. 70). Through further changes and transformations, we see Daoist ritual evolving in many directions, ranging from refined court ceremonies to integration with the local deities and spirit-mediums of village religion. There we see the dual role of the Daoist priest, as minister (chén 閻) in the sublimated court of Dao, and as general (jiàng 將) vis-à-vis the local spirits and demons – a complementary distinction played out in the civil-martial (wen/wu 文武) structure of much village ritual today. Local spirits may be either absorbed into the Daoist hierarchy as lower-ranked minions or fought as unruly, bloodthirsty demons. The role of the Daoist ritual institution in negotiating relationships, alliances, or conflicts between local and universal deities and forces is clear. It thus played an indispensable role both for local communities and for the imperial throne in their formation of religio-political alliances, providing a common but multivocal ritual and symbolic language for working through their relationships.
This richly empirical volume, which grew out of a conference held at the Institute of Modern History of the Academia Sinica, sheds new light on Chinese cities (Beijing, Suzhou, Shanghai, and Chengdu) from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries. The essays are organised under two headings: “urban life and culture” and “social groupings and urban dynamics.” The volume cuts across the 1839 divide to examine the evolution of consumer culture in pre-modern and modern Chinese cities. It also cuts across the 1949 divide to examine the formation of urban entities (i.e. associations, religious groups, professions, and class) and their organised capacities for social action. The chapters speak to each other with considerable engagement. The editors, active researchers at the academy, deserve much credit for their thoughtful organisation of a rich and rewarding volume.

Lai and Cheng open the volume with attention to the seventeenth century. Drawing on court archives, literati commentaries, and trade numbers, Lai shows that Manchu nobles in Beijing were avid consumers of imported goods such as woolen fabrics and glass products. The goods first earned favour in the imperial court, then readily inspired emulation throughout the banner community. The fashion took hold precisely because such consumption was exclusive and expensive. Cheng continues with this line of inquiry. He shows that beyond the court and the banner community, others in Chinese society also readily took up a full range of imported products — beer, cloth, clocks, and bicycles. Cheng credits general Chinese habits of consumption, rather than Manchu interest in conspicuous consumption, as a prime mover behind such adoption. Both essays muster quantitative sources to give context to the textual materials that speak to the phenomenon of robust Chinese receptiveness to new products of non-Chinese origin. The two essays combined to challenge the thesis that Qing China was ever a closed-minded empire insular in its consumer orientation. They also draw attention to the critical role of Chinese consumer culture as it functioned to selectively accept or reject new goods.

Lien and Chang then direct attention to Shanghai in the first quarter of the twentieth century. The authors consult not only the city’s ephemeral tabloids and commercial periodicals, the bulk of which have to be rediscovered, they also delve into Shanghai’s vast archives. Both authors take into account non-Chinese sources as well as non-Chinese scholarship to offer comparative perspectives on the practices of shopping and gambling in industrialising cities. Lien offers close-up examinations of urban men and women seeking pleasure and diversion in Shanghai’s department stores. Chang explains the ins and outs of Hai Alai matches in Shanghai and throws light on the game’s East Asian debut. Department store shopping in Shanghai (much as in Chicago and Paris) offered Chinese women a space to be safely feminine and in public for the first time. This does not, of course, prevent male shoppers from sexualising the stores’ female employees in conventional terms. Hai Alai matches, Chang shows, offered their spectators the excitement of speed, heat, and power embodied in Mediterranean male bodies of youth. Shanghai spectators, thanks to age-old gambling practices, transformed the matches into betting games of calculation. Female spectators meanwhile turned the games into visual consumption of exotic masculinity. Both essays succeed in “de-particularising” the Chinese consumers of the early twentieth century: i.e., they prove to be no different from consumers elsewhere in the world, nor were they different from others in having a cultural code of consumption of their own.

China in the twentieth century was of course not quite the same place China was in earlier times. Wu and Carroll place Suzhou at the centre of their essays. In the making of twentieth-century Suzhou, Wu shows, urban memories of past practices mattered as much as the new mode of transportation and the industrialisation of sightseeing. With trains and tour companies, time, remembered as well as experienced, became commodified in the commercialised representation of historical Suzhou. Modern tourists were thus able to access en masse scenic sites that were once exclusive during the Ming and the Qing. Carroll argues, meanwhile, that the rise of the sex industry was an even more powerful force in the spatial transformation of Republican Suzhou. Carroll’s chapter offers an in-depth examination of the rise of a spatial regime centred upon the sex industry. Modernity in Suzhou, as in Shanghai, entailed the commodification of culture and sex in a new way.

Sun and Wang offer, in their chapters, rich descriptions of popular mobilisations and collective actions concerning Shanghai household renters and Chengdu teahouse owners. In Sun we learn that Shanghai tenants in residential neighbourhoods got together to protest rent increases and the eviction of tenants. In Wang we learn that Chengdu teashop owners formed associations to contest state attempts to control their business practices. Both essays place emphasis on the self-directed capacities of these organisations and their eventual accommodation to the power of the state. “Modern” as the Chinese proprietors appeared to be on matters of economic interest, Liu, Fan, and Katz show that the city hosted a spiritual universe of Daoist and Buddhist beliefs, and communities of faith serving the public good were just as capable of self-organisation as their secular compatriots. Xu and Lin meanwhile probe the secular basis of the professionalisation and organisation of stage performers and accountants at Shanghai workplaces. Taken together, these chapters draw on a full range of urban associations formed on the basis of common interest, beliefs, and knowledge to offer a compelling portrait of Chinese cities in the first half of the twentieth century as places of vibrancy, diversity, and self-directed organised action. Iwama’s final essay offers yet another informative presentation about an urban profession and its organisation. All the promises of modernity then came to an end, as Iwama shows, upon the arrival of a new political order in the 1950s. The volume, in short, makes a strong case with regard to the openness and autonomy of Chinese urban society in the decades and centuries prior to 1949.

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This book proposes the catchy phrase of “Chinese ecocinema” as a new critical paradigm to investigate how Chinese films have engaged environmental and ecological issues in the active re-imagimation of locale, place, and space. Whereas Socialist China began breaking with traditional Chinese beliefs in a harmonious social and natural order, it was the state-sponsored developmentalism of the post-Mao era that brought about an unprecedented scale of modernisation-cum-destruction. Hence the volume focuses on Chinese-language feature films and documentaries from the 1980s to the present, which its contributors argue have manifested a new ecological consciousness by featuring biocentric approaches to nature, humanity, and modernity. The individual essays provide interesting and innovative readings of both canonical and little studied contemporary films, with attention to both cinematic form and the “real world” to which the texts refer.

The 14 chapters are organised into four parts on water, manufactured landscapes, urban spaces, and bioethics. Part I probes the pathology of Chinese rivers in contemporary film, with the first three essays by Jiayan Mi, Sheldon Lu, and Nick Kalds focusing on a cluster of films that depict the environmental and psychic impact of inundation, demolition, and dislocation resulting from the Three Gorges Dam Project. They all read films such as Jia Zhangke’s Still Life, Zhang Ming’s Wushan Yunyu, and Dai Sijie’s Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress as testimonies to the disorienting, traumatic experience of massive, irreversible obliteration of historically rich local communities. Also discussing films on water scarcity or pollution such as Chen Kaige’s Yellow Earth, Wu Tianming’s Old Well, and Tsai Mingliang’s Waterlogged works, Mi’s essay compellingly argues that water-themed films are not so much “ethnographical” as they are “topological,” mapping out the affective bond between people and their localities as well as connecting death by drowning with ecological breakdown. Andrew Hageman’s chapter considers the gritty cinematic aesthetic of Lou Ye’s Suzhou River as a representation of Shanghai’s contemporary ecology, with the camera aligned with the point of view of debris floating down the river, hence making us “tarry in the murky world of our own late capitalist creation.”

Part II, “Eco-Aesthetics, Nature, and Manufactured Landscape,” contains three of the most fascinating essays in this book. With Zhang Yinou’s Hero as a case study, Mary Farquhar uses the traditional concept of the “idea-image” (yi jing) to highlight the art and artifice of landscapes in “martial arts films in the age of digital reproduction.” Besides an innovative analysis of Hero’s theme “all land under heaven” (tianxia) as well as its colours and digital transformations, which can “expunge real pollution with a flick of the finger,” the postscript also turns to the real places where the film was shot, linking land, landscape, location, and the law through recent environmental debates. Jerome Silbergeld focuses on the question of facades and Beijing’s ecology in his analysis of Jia Zhangke’s The World, about the lives of migrant workers who staff a theme park with scaled-down replicas of landmarks from around the globe. Besides pointing out the film’s various linkages with contemporary ecological issues, Silbergeld also notes Chinese imperial precedents for landscape simulations. Likewise discussing Jia Zhangke’s films, Hongbing Zhang’s chapter explores the spatial relationship between the characters and the mise-en-scene, particularly the complementary figures of “ruins and grassroots.” Departing from the heroic portrayal of protagonists in mainstream cinema, Jia kept his grassroots characters away from the foreground through long shots, dwarfing them with the ruins of old socialist factories and demolished neighbourhoods, meanwhile showing their extraordinary resilience and ability to survive against all odds.

Highlighting the production and disappearance of urban spaces, Part III takes us to illegal coalmines in Shanxi and the industrial landscape of the Northeast, as well as the contemporary cityscapes of Hong Kong and Beijing. Ban Wang prefaxes his essay on Li Yang’s murder tale Blind Shaft and Wang Bing’s documentary West of the Tracks by describing the “tug of war” between “development-driven policy orientations” and the more “community-based,” “nature-friendly,” and “non-exploitative” socialist modernity (at least in theory). This chapter goes on to contrast the “beastly, barbarous existence” of workers – victims of the “unregulated market” – in contemporary neorealist and documentary cinema against the “proud socialist working class” as portrayed in the idealised images of Mao era films. Next, Chris Tong examines three Fruit Chan films as showing the “ecoscope” of the “real Hong Kong” that has so far eluded the (mis)representations of the city, exploring themes such as the degeneration and regeneration of urban space and bodies as well as entrapment and mobility across borders. Jing Nie’s chapter discusses the representations of Beijing’s urban space and malaise in Zhang Yang’s Shower, Wang Xiaoshuai’s Beijing Bicycle, Feng Xiaogang’s Cell Phone, and again Jia Zhangke’s The World. It pays special attention to the disappearing traditional spaces of hutongs and bathhouses that facilitated interpersonal relationships and memories, showing how the cozy and familiar sense of community gives way to alienation and displacement within the superficial mirage of a modern metropolis.

The remaining four chapters grouped under Part IV, “Bioethics, Non-Anthropocentrism, and Green Sovereignty,” shift their attention from urban to rural spaces in mainland China, Taiwan, and Tibet, examining films that search for other forms of spirituality than the commodity fetish. In his chapter on the ethical claims of place attachment, Xinmin Liu observes in Wu Tianming’s Old Well the emotive bonds local peasants forge with their ancestral habitat through manual labour, and the critique of urban betrayal and desertion of the rural in Hou Jianqi’s Nuan. Xiaoping Lin gives a descriptive analysis of Ning Hao’s Incense, which follows the tribulations of an impoverished Buddhist monk who tries to rescue his “hundred-year-old temple” by appealing to the government, begging for alms, and turning into a “venture capitalist,” only to be notified of the temple’s imminent demolition to make way for a new “road to riches.” Investigating the “woman-animal meme” in contemporary Taiwanese cinema, Chia-ju Chang analyses both Li Ang’s novella The Butcher’s Wife and its film adaptation by Zeng Zhuangxiang, Woman of Wrath, as vegetarian ecofeminist texts. Chang goes on to discuss the symbiotic relationship between humans and animals in Wang Shaodong’s animation Grandma and Her Ghosts, which challenges an anthropocentric vision of community by highlighting animal subjectivity.
Finally, Donghui He examines recent film representations of Tibet, contrasting Tian Zhuangzhuang’s ethnographic documentary De lamu with Tibetan director Pema Tsedan (Wanna Caidan’s) debut feature The Silent Holy Stones. Whereas Tian portrays the ancient trade route between Yunnan and Tibet as a soon-to-be-wiped-out harmonious paradise, Pema shows us a “lived-in environment firmly grounded in everyday specifics,” where Tibetans fit a modern Chinese television drama version of Journey to the West into their own beliefs in pilgrimage.

As a whole, this collection of essays effectively connects aesthetic critiques of contemporary Chinese cinema to environmental, ecological, and bioethical issues, employing close readings of film texts as the dominant approach. With the exception of Farquhar’s chapter, however, little attention is given to the production and reception of these films, or to the economy and ecology of cinematic circulation. Apart from a general condemnation of global capital and market reforms, what remains elusive is how these films might change the environment or compel their audiences to act differently. Yet in teasing out the dialectic of utopia and dystopia in these cinematic portrayals of Chinese locales, this volume may help cultivate among its readers more discerning views of today’s environmental crises as mediated through contemporary cinema.

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Kam Louie (ed.), Hong Kong Culture: Word and Image, Hong Kong University Press, 2010, 312 pp.

FIONA YUK-WA LAW

It is always an inexhaustible task to define and explain what Hong Kong culture is, and the result would usually be a staggering one. This timely anthology sheds light on the uniqueness of Hong Kong’s cultural scene in a specific context of the post-1997 era via an intellectual trajectory of word and image. Edited by Kam Louie, Dean of the Faculty of Arts at the University of Hong Kong and a prolific scholar in Chinese literature, the 13 essays in this book come from a conference convened by the Faculty of Arts on the topic of “Post-1997 Hong Kong culture: Word and image” in 2007. Hong Kong-based and overseas scholars from diverse disciplinary backgrounds contribute their readings of Hong Kong culture from a wide range of academic interests. Having 1997 as a point of departure and contact, these essays review the long-ranged Chinese roots and global influences that are intricately related to the territory’s recent transmutations through attending to its sociopolitical background in the analyses of film, literature, performance art, and the cityscape, etc.

In light of the attempt to “explore Hong Kong as a polyphonic, diverse source of cultural ‘texts’” (p. 1) under the given topic, Louie in his introduction suggests several phrases to inspire readers’ understanding of Hong Kong in uncompromising terms, such as Hong Kong being a “cultural fault-line” in a shaky geographical terrain, a “translation space” between Chinese-ness and Western-ness, a “cultural hub” that joins vernacular culture with cosmopolitanism, a “multifaceted, polyphonic culture that resists easy homogenization” (p. 2), a “transmission zone” where artists and audiences are energised (p. 5), and so on. These phrases and descriptions are indicative in rendering and reinforcing Hong Kong as a site of dynamic cultural studies on an unstable borderline of ruptures and connection. The editor and the authors refuse to rest on an easy, generalised discussion by simply defining Hong Kong culture within the nexus of East-West hybridity, rather, they marble their discussions on various views of Hong Kong’s cultural scene with a solid contextual knowledge of the city without manipulating excessive theoretical terminologies.

Unlike many anthologies, this book is not divided into sections to make a clear-cut division between discussions on word and image, so that the 13 essays are not rigidly defined by their scopes of interest. However, a subtle route from word to image is found in the order of chapters, which may suggest an understandable path from the local (vernacular Cantonese culture and its related language issues that involve the Chinese and English language) to the global (circulation of images in the context of globalisation). This book review does not strictly follow this implied local-global nexus, while readers may note that my order of writing about these chapters in fact suggests an underlying cobweb of cultural influence between Hong Kong, China, Asia, and the West, and that such a sphere of influence is what Louie and the authors would like to emphasise in their discussions of Hong Kong’s unique cultural nourishment under the diverse but somehow cross-influence of postcolonialism, orientalism, postsocialism, postmodernism, and the emergence of localism and cultural preservation.

This delightful journey of word and image starts with John M. Carroll’s chapter, which provides a comprehensive overview of Hong Kong’s unique decolonisation process by outlining crucial changes and continuities in the city’s political realities between 1997 and 2007. Carroll’s historical framework succinctly points out the difficulties and complexities involved in defining Hong Kong’s postcolonial history, especially when the SAR’s first decade was rocked by global calamities such as SARS and the Asian Financial Crisis. The aftermaths of the local and global crises, namely the city’s political disappointment and the emergence of political commemoration-type demonstrations and marches by Hong Kong residents, are then further explained in Carolyn Cartier’s following chapter, which investigates the realm of the performative in Hong Kong’s political life through protest art. Another macroscopic account of Hong Kong’s post-1997 anxiety is manifested in David Clarke’s engaging essay on the “haunted city.” Instead of explaining the psychic persistence of a haunting experience via a supernatural, poignant discourse of fear, the author provides a number of local examples in architecture, filmic texts, urban planning, and artworks in order to unfold the way Hong Kong’s self-perceived urban landscape is narcissistically articulated in spatial terms with the existence of an implied other. While Clarke’s chapter on Hong Kong’s urban other focuses on the traces that can be found in the city’s visual cultures, Esther M. K. Cheung’s later chapter takes a close look at Hong Kong films with a different notion of the “ghostly city.” Through a microscopic “spectral analysis,” or “hermeneutic reading of the cinematic depiction of space” in three Hong Kong films made at “various moments of disjointed time in Hong Kong history,” Cheung’s essay “ex-
explore(s) the possibility of writing a meta-history of Hong Kong over the past thirty years” so as to see “how an allegorical reading of the ordinary, quotidian aspects of urban life offers us chances to understand the effects of eventful changes” (p. 170), namely the kairotic moment of the 1997 handover. In addition to Clarke and Cheung’s chapters, Pheng Cheah also shows a special interest in Fruit Chan’s films in his discussion. By critically examining Hong Kong’s post-1997 situation with the city’s self-celebration of “being” a global city, Cheah situates his textual analysis of Chan’s Hollywood, Hong Kong in his acute exploration of what it means to be a global city under the official imperatives of consolatory discourse and image production. In addition to analysing the “plasticity” of the global city’s cultural form beneath the “hegemonic imaginary” of global dreams and the “power of the virtual image” (p. 197), this chapter, echoing Clarke and Cheung’s, introduces the idea that dreams of global capitalism would be lived as nightmares by the marginalised through the lens of self-referentiality.

Gina Marchetti’s chapter focuses on another cultural fault line, or “cinematic earthquake” (p. 167) resulting from globalisation. In her study of the phenomena of cinematic remake, adaptation, and global filmic traffic in the case of Infernal Affairs and The Departed, Marchetti conducts an interesting analysis of this oft-studied aspect in film studies by considering the participatory culture expressed by fan communities in blogs and online discussion groups. This combination of textual analysis and reading of diverse comments by local and global fans of the two films provides important material for expanding academic interest in the study of Hong Kong cinema in the context of global circulation of ideas and images by drawing attention to the power of public opinion. Giorgio Biancorosso’s chapter, on the other hand, provides a musical scenario (which is least discussed in the study of Hong Kong cinema) about the East-West, local-global intertextual influences via Wong Kar-wai’s films and their soundtracks. Since Wong’s films do not easily express attributions from other cultural texts such as literature and film, Biancorosso outlines Wong’s sonic space and personal musical taste by combining an analysis of the visual elements with a detailed discussion of the use of pop compilations. The chapter focuses on the way new meanings are generated for the pre-existing music rearranged in Wong’s films, so as to suggest an orbit that joins the local with the global, as well as the personal with the collective.

The mutual influence between Hong Kong and Hollywood or the West is like the paradox of egg or chicken, while in C. J. W.-L. Wee’s chapter, the sphere of cultural influence spreads among the East Asian regions. By focusing on the intra-Asian connection and competition that lie behind post-1990s Hong Kong cinema with a discussion on the emergence of the “New” East Asia through a historical lens, Wee suggests that the shared understanding of capitalist modernisation and rapid urbanisation among these Asian regions is the mechanism that produces the “shared vision of everyday urban life” (p. 114) or “the ongoing development of urban-modern lifestyles” (p. 115) in the “fractured New Asia.” Such notions of the modern and the urban provide useful insights into the shaping of cosmopolitan images on Asian screens and therefore explain Hong Kong’s significant position in this dynamic cultural productivity within the elusive concept of Asia.

Considering the increasing number of Hong Kong-China co-productions as an example of the implementation of “one country, two systems” after the signing of CEPA (Mainland-Hong Kong Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement) in 2003, Chu Yiu-wai’s chapter addresses the important question of whether Deng Xiaoping’s idea would necessarily guarantee “one country, two cultures” by tracing a brief history of mainland influence on Hong Kong cinema. The oft-proclaimed decline of post-1997 Hong Kong cinema and the rise of co-production in recent years are both studied in this chapter as indicative of the emerging umbrella concept of “Chinese cinema” under which, according to Chu, Hong Kong cinema’s multiplicity can hardly survive (p. 144). Such a sense of crisis not only echoes earlier chapters sounding the alert over cultural mutation after 1997 but also brings to light a changing understanding of Chineseness and Hong Kong’s cultural identity, which is further explored in the arena of word. Elaine Ho’s chapter on biliteracy and translation reads “Hong Kong’s complex linguistic geography” (p. 56) through close-reading three Hong Kong poems and their English translations. By reflecting on the post-1997 official policy of biliteracy and trilingualism, and acknowledging the “dynamic interflows” between translation and postcolonial studies, Ho’s analysis of the three poems suggests that the “wording” of Hong Kong through English could point to the city’s “original Chineseness” as well as its hybridity (p. 65). Douglas Kerr’s chapter focuses on the place of English poetry in Hong Kong by reading Louise Ho’s poems. Also attending to the poetic form, this chapter examines the way English as a “world” or “a-local” language articulates locality, migratory experiences, and cultural memory in Ho’s works. Kerr’s highlight of the strategic use of English in Hong Kong poetry echoes Michael Ingham’s essay on Xu Xi’s literary works. However, instead of a close study of the literary genre alone, Ingham makes an interesting connection between the literary and film forms by addressing to the notion of “essay” in order to unfold the critical discourse in Hong Kong’s cultural production and concern for controversial issues with a critical distance. His comparative analysis of Xu Xi’s essay writings and Herman Yau’s “film essay” provides a profoundly notable approach in comparative study across word and image. No doubt, a “film essay” is similar to the documentary genre, and Chris Berry has extended the discussion of this non-fictional genre in his chapter on Tammy Cheung’s films. Berry’s detailed study of Cheung’s career as an independent documentary filmmaker is instructive in mapping the alternative film scene in Hong Kong, Beijing, and Taiwan. According to Berry, this independent mode of cultural production, or “independent culture” that generates public debate through aesthetic practices, is an important part of Hong Kong’s modern culture. As other authors in this volume have hinted, it is clear that freedom of speech and autonomous thought are what make Hong Kong an important cultural hub despite its potentially cracking edges.

It is easy to understand why the majority of texts analysed are films and literary works, taking into account that they are indeed representative genres of “word and image,” but it may enrich the scope of scholarship if a more extensive range of cultural texts could be included. The chapters on music, other forms of visual arts, and a mixed study across cultural forms are therefore major leaps from existing scholarships. In general, although the book may not break radically new ground in building a conceptual or theoretical framework to understand Hong Kong culture, and some chapters share similar viewpoints about Hong Kong’s current problems and opportunities in different dictions, the essays are all highly readable and they are all fundamental readings for courses about Hong Kong (or even postsocialist China) cultural studies with an emphasis on textual analysis. The book will definitely invite further scholarship in Hong Kong’s literary, cinematic, and cultural studies under an ever-renewing context.

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A time when Taiwan is habitually thought of as an "identity laboratory," Samia Ferhat and Sandrine Marchand seek to present it as an "island of memories." As memory plays a major role in the construction of identity, this shift in emphasis is quite logical. While collective memory ought to be singular, the diversity of the island’s affective communities, and therefore of experiences and memories, fully justifies the plural in the title. Plurality is also reflected among the authors: the book is the fruit of collaboration among scholars from three countries – Britain, Taiwan, and France – drawn from different disciplines (history, sociology, anthropology, and literature).

The book opens with a reflection on Taiwan being an island and its ambiguous relation with the mainland. It comes across as a place of churning, geneity and stability (p. 10). With its diversity and its dynamism born of inter-mingling, Taiwan is a creation that is creating itself (p. 11). The introduction goes over the major episodes in Taiwan’s history through the prism of what is at stake in current memory, such as the Japanese colonisers’ cultural assimilation policy, the re-Sinification to the detriment of Taiwanese heritage during the Nationalist dictatorship, and finally the democratisation supposedly tending towards a multicultural national identity, although, of course, it was mostly the formerly subjugated groups that expressed the greatest desire for memorial recognition (pp. 24-25). This reflection concludes by noting that Taiwanese youth hardly pay heed to the quarrels of previous generations. They even seem to have overcome such quarrels, given their relaxed memory of reconciliation.

Apart from this rapid overview of Taiwanese history, essential in order for the work to be accessible to non-specialists, the introduction posits some theoretical bases to dispel any misunderstanding over the notion of memory. While individual memory is evoked and would be mobilised through the figure of the exile, the accent is on the collective and identity dimension. Collective memory must not be confused with official ideology. On the contrary, it has helped preserve memories of often sorrowful experiences that did not adhere to what was authorised but which found expression with the plural in the title. Plurality is also reflected among the authors: the book is the fruit of collaboration among scholars from three countries – Britain, Taiwan, and France – drawn from different disciplines (history, sociology, anthropology, and literature).

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The first chapter stands out from the rest as it is the only one dealing with the Qing domination over Taiwan. Edward Vickers convincingly shows that the island was treated by the Manchus as a colony to be populated, but he does not seek to add another pillar to the edifice of colonial studies, rather rising above the ultranationalist Chinese and Taiwanese discourses, both of which tend to be mired in victimhood with insufficient attention to Taiwanese Hans’ role as actors in the colonial mission.

Other contributions deal with the dichotomy between benshengren (Taiwanese who had been on the island since before 1945) and waishengren (those who arrived gradually with the Nationalist retreat from the mainland, also referred to as Mainlanders), which structured Taiwan throughout the authoritarian era. It is still perceptible today, but less obtrusively: Wu Nai-de reviews research on the “28 February 1947 incident.” This episode, in which Nationalist troops massacred a large part of the local elite and many thousands of innocent people, poisoned relations between the two communities for more than half a century. Despite a prohibition on any mention of the tragedy during the dictatorship, memories have remained vibrant, especially among families. Democratisation helped begin memorial work that remains incomplete. Marchand focuses specifically on Mainlanders, not those who joined the Nationalist regime’s elite but the uprooted ones, the indigent waishengren who were unable to integrate once exiled in Taiwan. She seeks to explore the feeling of nostalgia expressed in works written by waishengren, with special attention to those of the second generation, that is, those born in Taiwan.

The 1970s and the emergence, followed by affirmation, of a collective conscience centred on Taiwan form the common theme in the chapters by Hsiau A-chin and Damien Morier-Genoud. Until then, official ideology emphasised Chinese traditional culture as well as a glorious vision of a merely temporary island retreat that would lead to a triumphal return to the mainland. Meanwhile it downplayed heritage specific to Taiwan. The Taiwanese sociologist shows how the maturing of a new generation of Taiwanese intellectuals helped shed more light on the struggle against Japanese occupants so as to promote a greater participation of local people in the island’s governance. This marked the start of the “non-party” (dangwu) movement, which played a leading role in the regime’s democratisation. Morier-Genoud holds that a key moment in the formation of a “native” historiography, i.e., free of Nationalist ideological shackles, came in the early 1970s. Thus an anthropological study came out in 1972 stressing the “indigenisation” of Han Taiwanese, as opposed to the “integration of the periphery,” which was dear to Nationalist historiography (p. 268). Democratisation led to an institutional and academic recognition of such new reading of the island’s past, with for instance the setting up in 2004 of the Institute of Taiwan History in the Academia Sinica.

The chapters by Samia Ferhat and Peng Hsiao-yen introduce a new memory, that of the second Sino-Japanese war, focusing on different assessments observable on the two sides of the Taiwan Strait. Ferhat captures the changes in perceiving the past by looking at official commemorations. In China, they closely reflect current political concerns. During the Cold War, these concerns centred on the importance of confronting the United States,
but with the rise of nationalism, it is Japanese crimes and the experiences of the population that are in the limelight, swinging between heroism and martyrdom. Feelings are more complex in Taiwan: anti-Japanese resistance is a source of Nationalist pride, but the pro-independence forces are unconcerned with this heritage. Peng chooses to analyse Taiwanese director Ang Lee’s 2007 film Lust/Caution. Given the theme, which could seem anachronistic considering Taiwanese society at present, and also because of his origins, Ang Lee was quickly seen as representing “the viewpoint of the second generation of Mainlanders” (p. 190). The way in which he invokes the Sino-Japanese war takes after the official historiography of the authoritarian period, characterised by a glorification of the resistance in the face of Japanese invaders and a celebration of Chinese nationalism. However, the director steps back and reverses this viewpoint via the main protagonist, a young Nationalist spy who finally allows the escape of a collaborator she was to kill, thereby condemning herself and her companions to certain death. The character’s ambiguity is well brought out and the author goes on to a very detailed reading of the film, but Peng’s conclusion is contradictory because she asserts that “Taiwan has not built a collective conscience,” while at the same time saying, “The problem of identity is no longer an issue” (p. 219). Further, she interprets Ang Lee’s tears following the film’s premiere as a sign of “relief at seeing his country recognising his emotion” (p. 222): would the recognition then not signal that despite the disparities in family trajectories among Taiwan’s population, there still exists a commonality of feeling?

The last memory the book deals with is that of the aborigines. Using Sandim village as an example, Chantal Zheng shows how the Paiwans’ re-appropriation of Christianity helped them revive and reclaim their own traditions, which until then seemed destined to disappear. Thus, the snake painting in the church is part of the Genesis tale but is also, and above all, the totemic animal at the centre of Paiwan cosmology. Other elements from Christianity find an echo in traditional religion, which has been able to persist through them. The church also helps preserve languages, as it has been one of the few places where inhabitants could speak in their own tongues (p. 244). Liu Pi-Chen shows that aboriginal heritage, at first stigmatised, has emerged as an object of reclaiming and a source of new-found pride. Liu describes the discriminatory policies under the Qing, the Japanese, and the Nationalists, and the initial movements for reclaiming identity in the 1980s. One of the results was a jettisoning of old categorisations such as “mountain compatriots” (shanbao 原住民) in favor of “aborigines” (yuanzhumin 原民). Finally, there is a study of the Kavalan ethnic group, which had to wait until 2002 for recognition as a separate entity. In order to ensure its cohesion, the group has focused its memory on a short account presenting them as originating from the Ilan region three generations ago, although the Kavalan today mostly live in the island’s south and centre. It does amount to a recreation of collective memory.

Most of the accounts in this collection are concentrated on studied populations. A chronological approach could also have been attempted, if the idea was to study the constitution of the island’s own collective memory. While a few minor oversights have been touched on in this review, they do not diminish the high quality of the book as a whole. This rich and diverse work can be recommended especially to those interested in the issue of memory in the Chinese world.

Translated by N. Jayaram.

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Books received


