

Book Review

Amy Jane Barnes, *Museum Representations of Maoist China: From Cultural Revolution to Commie Kitsch*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2014, hardback £58.50, pp. x+253

This promising book is about museum representations of Maoist China *in Britain*. Since the rise of *chinoiserie*, things identified with China have fascinated Western audiences. Recent research has shed much light on how 'Chinese art' was consumed, looted, classified, and defined by Westerners. Barnes contributes to this scholarship by examining the presence, and often enough the absence, of Cultural Revolution-era Chinese art in British collections and exhibitions. The topic provides a platform for a thoughtful reflection on how museums handle difficult content – difficult in this case because Cultural Revolution China is 'geographically and culturally distant,' as well as 'temporally and ideologically removed from our present' (9).

Two different narratives run through the book. The first is about China in British eyes, the second is about Chinese things in British exhibitions. An introduction that defines key concepts precedes an overview, in chapter 2, of popular perceptions of China in the West from the Enlightenment to the present. Chapters 3 and 4 then focus on China's Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) and contemporaneous British imaginings of communist China. Following Said's *Orientalism* and Colin Mackerras's *Western Images of China*, Barnes argues that China was not objectively apprehended by British audiences but constructed as an 'Other' to the West. For this reason, the book is 'largely a study of Britain,' despite the fact that the visual culture under consideration is Chinese (2).

From Chapter 5 on, the book interweaves a history of British perceptions of China with analysis of British exhibitions of Mao era Chinese art, beginning with *Peasant Paintings from Hu County*, which travelled Britain in the waning years of the Cultural Revolution. Chapters 6 through 9 roughly cover the 1980s, the 1990s, and the 2000s respectively. These chapters discuss key events in post-Mao Chinese history; they explore China-related cultural phenomena in Britain, including the popularity of Cultural Revolution memoirs and a consumer fad for 'commie kitsch,' and they discuss exhibitions of Mao era visual culture, from revolutionary posters to Mao badges, in British institutions, including the Victoria and Albert museum, the British Museum, and the University of Westminster. The conclusion and epilogue extend the discussion into the very recent past.

The content of the book, especially its latter half, is extremely rich. Sources examined by the author include archival documents, exhibition catalogues, and newspaper reports. Especially fascinating are the reflections of British museum professionals currently or formerly engaged in collecting or exhibiting Mao-era visual culture. Barnes interviewed these individuals, so the material is fully original.

The voices of these museum professionals are welcome in a monograph that is ultimately prescriptive. Barnes presents a narrative of a British Orientalist gaze but enthusiastically argues that Mao-era visual culture, thoughtfully curated, has the potential to disrupt distorted and exoticized impressions of China. She thus criticizes art surveys and exhibitions that excise China's revolutionary period even as they purport to present Chinese art as a whole and she advocates for Cultural Revolution exhibitions that avoid grand narratives, offer nuanced context, and take seriously both the political and aesthetic content of collections. Such prescriptions must be weighed against the potential challenge of summarizing the Cultural Revolution 'in a wall panel of 150 words,' to borrow the phrasing of curator Frances Wood (206).

Some may feel that *Museum Representations* provides an excess of historical context. But for readers without expertise in Chinese studies – and such readers comprise the book's primary audience – Barnes has provided an accessible history of the Cultural Revolution, post-Mao China, and Sino-British relations. This broader history, moreover, serves as the foundation for the book's argument that the China perceived by British audiences as exotic, as a utopia, or as a dystopia is an image that most clearly reflects contemporary British preoccupations. Museums can either contribute to such images of China or challenge them in the interest of engaging the public in broader dialogue about the historical significance of communism and other timely issues.

The book's conclusion strays from Barnes' larger argument by repeatedly highlighting the importance of Western exhibitions of Cultural Revolution-era art in light of Chinese efforts to silence discourse about that turbulent decade. Barnes suggests, for instance, that 'Western museums' might serve as a 'surrogate home' for public discussion of the Cultural Revolution because such discussion is 'stifled' in China (207). This celebration of the Western public sphere, set against a China clearly marked as Other, potentially reinforces Orientalist stereotypes of an authoritarian regime in which an oppressed people are cowed into mute passivity. It is thus important to point out that despite active state censorship, Chinese museums do exhibit Cultural Revolution era visual culture and Chinese people do debate the legacy of the Mao era. Shanghai is home to the Shanghai Propaganda Poster Art Centre and in Sichuan province a private museum is dedicated to the Cultural Revolution (e.g. Ho and Li 2015).

Of particular interest are the Chinese-curated virtual museums, studied by Li Jie, that 'often overlap and replicate themselves...fighting, flaunting, and flirting with the cyberpolice in their tireless self-proliferation' (Li, 2009: 540). Virtual museums, including those drawing on British collections, complicate the East/West, British/Chinese binaries that frame *Museum Representations*. They beg for further study, especially since, as Barnes points out, Mao era visual culture is characterized by mass-production. Does the materiality of something like a mass-produced Mao poster lend itself especially well to digital exhibition? Might digital platforms help alleviate some of the challenges of contextualizing revolutionary art with sensitivity and nuance? Barnes mentions one digital exhibition based on the University of Westminster collection, but leaves the subject largely unexplored.

Still, this book was a rewarding read for a specialist in Chinese history with an interest in museums. It will appeal to diverse audiences as it touches on so many important topics, including communist visual culture, how museums handle controversial subject matter, and collections and exhibitions dealing with recent history. The book's prohibitive expense is thus regrettable.

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References

- Ho, Denise and Li Jie (2015) 'From Landlord Manor to Red Memorabilia: Reincarnations of a Chinese Museum Town', in *Modern China*, <http://mcx.sagepub.com/content/early/2015/09/15/0097700415604580.full.pdf+html> (pre-published 2015, print version forthcoming 2016).
- Li, Jie (2009) 'Virtual Museums of Forbidden Memories: Hu Jie's Documentary Films on the Cultural Revolution', *Public Culture*, 21(3) 539-549.