

Xiaoping Lin, *Children of Marx and Coca Cola*, Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press, 2010

Paola Voci (University of Otago)

Xiaoping Lin's *Children of Marx and Coca Cola* offers an impressive display of scholarship that confidently moves from acute film analyses to insightful art criticism and in-depth examinations of the most recent theorizations of Chinese contemporary social and cultural changes. By focusing on a rich selection of visual texts chosen among the most representative works of both the Chinese avant-garde artists and independent cinema's filmmakers, Lin provides a convincing overview of the main tropes that have characterized the artistic reflection on the transition from socialism to capitalism in China. Such transition, the author notes, is better understood via Slavoj Žižek's notion of trauma (p. 23) as this transition was imposed to rather than chosen by the Chinese people and has resulted in painful contradictions and social inequalities. The book's main appeal is indeed in Lin's strong voice, which engages the reader at the same time in a rigorous academic exploration and a personal conversation. The writing style successfully combines critical reviews of relevant scholarship and the author's own life experiences (including his first encounter with Andy Warhol as his translator when he visited China in 1982). Similarly, the discussion of the primary texts benefits not only from Lin's first-hand knowledge of the various exhibits and artworks as well as his subtle "insider" understanding of both the on-screen and off-screen realities explored by independent cinema, but also from his references to the larger critical discourses in which they have been analyzed (by scholars such as Dai Jinhua, Geremie Barmé, Gao Minglu, Liu Kang and Zhang Zhen).

The book's introduction and postlude are among the strengths of this book. They concisely create the framework into which each chapter is located and provide the required overall cohesiveness that thus sustains Lin's argument as a book project. Lin begins by discussing why he has chosen to use the term "avant-garde" (instead of the less militant and politically neutral, "experimental") and the term "independent" (instead of the more descriptive Six Generation of urban cinema) to refer to these visual artists. Lin argues that these terms better define the artists' oppositional distance from the official culture. The main argument is that these two worlds (the avant-garde art and the independent cinema) not only clearly intersect --and have indeed already been critically related to each other—but also need to be understood as expressions of the same postsocialist trauma, i.e., the distinctive tensions between a postmodern globalist identity and new avant-garde nationalism. Lin agrees with Geremie Barmé that the paradoxical dilemma faced by the contemporary political dissenters in the arts is the need to negotiate between their antagonistic stances and their forced (or chosen) institutionalization which makes them (possibly unwilling?) "insiders" of the same official system they have set out to criticize from the "outside". In order to give evidence of their shared concerns and similar responses, the author selects a few powerful tropes that recur in avant-garde art as well as independent cinema. These visual tropes all point to the intrusion of "invading alien objects" like luxury cars (BMW, Mercedes, Audi...) or imported products such as Coca Cola and Starbuck Coffee shops. As artists appropriate these tropes in their painting, photos, or films, on the one hand they use them to emphasize the contradictions embedded in

global capitalism, on the other hand they also comment on the rise of national pride and a new nationalist response to the old threat of Western imperialism. In the postlude, Lin reprises his main argument and discusses how the international dynamics of cultural globalization (as embodied by the international art biennales and film festivals) as well as the domestic dynamics of local art installations (such as the *Bat Project I-IV* and *Beijing 2008* exhibits at the Today Art Museum) on the one hand provide a space to develop alternative, critical and even satirical commentaries that challenge master narratives, but also all contribute to “force” these self-declared antagonistic art practices into a very ambivalent relationship with the institutions that provide them the needed outlet for their work and give them official recognition.<sup>1</sup>

The book is divided into three parts, “Recreating Urban Space in Avant-garde Art”, “China’s Lost Youth through the Lens of Independent Cinema” and “Quest or Meaning in a Spiritual Void”. The first section focuses on the work of Chinese artists living and exhibiting in Beijing and New York, which are the two global cities with which the author is admittedly most familiar. In Lin’s analysis, these artists’ different creative choices are possibly underscored as their commonality is emphasized. For instance, avant-garde art’s re-presentation of the simultaneous collapse of old (Yin Xiuzhen’s *The Ruined City*) and the growth of new urban spaces (Hong Hao’s *Beijing No2* and *The Big Tower*) is framed into a broader reflection on the disintegration of both traditional and socialist values and urban markers (Wang Guofeng’s series *Ideals*), the invasion of (western-imported) global capitalism values and urban markers, and the permanence of unsolved contradictions related to the spiritual void created by the collapse of the former and the problematic adoption of the latter. Hong Hao’s treatment of the relationship between power and architecture (especially in his 2008 oil painting *The Bird’s Nest*) is related to the author’s own view of Beijing as a less-threatening global Olympic city in which phallic verticatility of the skyscrapers (which were the symbols of the earlier 1990s Beijing global megacity’s ambitions) is softened and feminized. Lin also points out how the Olympic-originated architecture is ironic as these building that have come to symbolize nationalist pride are in fact foreign-designed. Among the three New York-based Chinese artists included in this section (Cai Guoqing, Xu Bing, and Zhang Huan) Cai Guoqing’s work is probably the clearest expression of this embedded irony. In the author’s opinion, Cai embodies the tension between a globalist ambition and nationalist pride. Lin defines his work as “a postmodern return to culture and tradition” (p. 78), which alludes to the contradictions of Chinese society and the “dangers and hypocrisies inherent on global relationships” (p. 79).

The second section includes film analyses of some of the critically most acclaimed Sixth Generation films (Zhang Yuan’s *Beijing Bastards*, Wang Xiaoshuai’s *Beijing Bicycle*, Lou Ye’s *Suzhou River*, Wang Quan’an’s *Lunar Eclipse* and Zhang Ming’s *Rain Clouds over Wushan*, Wang Chao’s *Anyang Orphan*) and a few other non-Six

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<sup>1</sup> Yingjin Zhang has been among the first scholars to point to the problematic relationship between independent filmmaking and film festival politics, in his “Chinese Cinema and Transnational Cultural Politics: Reflections on Film Festivals, Film Productions, and Film Studies” *Journal of Modern Literature in Chinese*, 2, 1 (July 1998): 105-32; and in “Trapped Freedom and Localized Globalism.” In Pickowicz and Yingjin Zhang eds., *From Underground to Independent: Alternative Film Culture in Contemporary China*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006, 123-42.

Generation independent films (such as Gu Changwei's *Peacock* and Li Shaohong's *Stolen Life*). Many of these films have amply been analyzed, dissected and interpreted in relation to their documentary quality, their fragmented subjectivities, and most notably scholars' attention has focused on their re-definition of urban spaces, its centres, its peripheries, and especially the people who inhabit their margins. Lin's analyses contribute to the scholarship on Sixth Generation cinema not only via his reading of "classic" such as *Beijing Bicycle* or *Suzhou River* by also including some less-known and studied films, such as *Rain Clouds over Wushan*.

The last section centres on the critique of contemporary urban capitalism via the exploration of the spiritual void it has created. The section analyzes Jia Zhangke's early cinematic trilogy (*Xiao Shan Going Home*, *Xiao Wu*, and *Platform*), the video works of Yang Fudong, and Ning Hao's debut film *Incense*. The chapter on Yang Fudong's videos (and in particular his famous *Seven Intellectuals in Bamboo Forest*) vividly renders Yang's unique style (and his tribute to both Chinese silent cinema and American film noir) and examines how Yang's postmodern drama stages a quite ambiguous and ultimately illusionary and deceptive escape to a lost paradise. The chapter on Jia is possibly the least successful in the book, possibly because so much has already been written on his these works (including Lin's own study included in Lu and Ye eds., *Chinese Language and Film*, 2005, of which this chapter is a revised version) that the short chapter does not seem to render justice neither to the complexity of the films nor to the previous critical scholarship on this topic.<sup>2</sup> Much more convincing and novel is his analysis of Ning Hao's less-known film *Incense* (at least compared to Ning's later hit *Crazy Stone*). Lin examines how *Incense* reflects and comments upon the need to revive and transform old traditions, like Buddhism, in order to survive in contemporary China. In particular the film is a tragicomic tale of a monk who tries to save his hundred-year old temple and turns into a "pathetic venture capitalist" but he is in the end crashed by the same "brutal capitalistic market forces" he had tried to embrace (p. 201). Under scrutiny is more specifically "Earthily Buddhism" (p. 188), which, rather than advocate withdrawal from the world, suggests that, in order to find enlightenment and salvation, we should enter the world (*rushi*) and in fact actively engage with globalization. As Earthily Buddhism also finds alliance with Metropolitan Buddhism, the faith and the religious practice associated with Buddhism become empty shells that can only lead to alienation and to a moral failure, which is beyond redemption.

While there is much to be learnt and appreciated in the author's scholarship and the wide selection of case studies, there are some weaknesses that impact on the otherwise high quality of this publication. In terms of critical literature, while the author engages with the work of most major relevant authors, it surprises the absence of references to some scholars who have done important research on the topic of urban space in contemporary avant-garde art (such as Julia Andrews or Wu Hong) or on the cinema of the Sixth Generation in relation to the specific themes addressed by Li (such as Chris Berry, Jerome Silbergeld, Michael Berry). A much more conspicuous limitation is that considerable portion of the book has already been published and, those of us who have already appreciated Lin's previous publications

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<sup>2</sup> See Michael Berry, *Jia Zhangke's 'Hometown Trilogy': Xiao Wu, Platform, Unknown Pleasures*, London: BFI Film Classic Series, 2009.

on this topic, may feel that the unpublished material included in the book, while expanding the analysis to other visual texts that Lin had not previously addressed, does not add significant new perspectives to Lin's earlier articles (four chapters have appeared in *Third Intellect*, an two other chapters were published in *ARTAsia Pacific* and in *Chinese Language Film*, ed. S. Lu and E. Yeh).

The fact that 6 out of the 9 chapters have already appeared (although in different versions) as stand-alone articles also impacts on the overall structure of the book. The two first sections (on the avant-garde and on cinema) do not quite dialogue with each other and while – as mentioned above—the introduction and the postlude do a good work in creating a cohesive framework for the various case studies, the individual chapters remain in fact often isolated. The little inter-referentiality that ties the chapters to each other is not sufficient to create the comparative perspective that the framework set up by the introduction leads us to expect.

Despite these shortcomings, Xiaoping Lin's book is a very valuable contribution to the field of Chinese visual culture. His insightful examination of contemporary avant-garde art and his engaging film analyses can be certainly appreciated by scholars and students alike.

**Paola Voci** is a senior lecturer at the University of Otago. Her research focuses on Chinese cinemas and, in particular, documentary videomaking. She has published in *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, *Senses of Cinema*, *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies*, and contributed to the *Encyclopaedia of Chinese Cinema*. Her work appears in several edited collections of essays. She has just published *China on Video* (Routledge, 2010), a book that analyses movies made and viewed on smaller screens (i.e., the DV camera, the computer monitor—and, within it, the Internet window—and the cellphone display) .

#### Selected Publications:

*China On Video: Smaller-screen Realities*, London and New York, Routledge, 2010  
[<http://www.routledge.com/books/China-on-Video-ISBN9780415464529>].

Leckie, J. and **Voci, P.**, eds. *Localizing Asia in Aotearoa New Zealand*, Dunmore, Forthcoming, 2011.

"Chinese Portable Movies" *Bianco e Nero*, Special Issue on Mobile Film, Forthcoming.

"Blowup Beijing: the City as a Twilight Zone." In Chris Berry, Lisa Rofel, and Lü Xinyu, eds., *The New Chinese Documentary Movement*, Hong Kong University Press, 2010.

"Rejecting words: illiteracy, silence and the visual" in *Rural Transformations: Perspectives on Translocation in a Global Age*, Ed. Vijay Devadas, Henry Johnson, and Chris Prentice, Amsterdam, New York, Rodopi, 2010, p.105-134

"Multiple-screen Realities", in Olivia Khoo and Sean Metzger, eds., *Futures of Chinese Cinema: Technologies and Temporalities in Chinese Screen Cultures*, Portland, Or., USA, Intellect Books, 2009, pp. 265-276.