Introductory Remarks “Reading Photographs: Visual Culture and Everyday Life in Republican China”

Wen-hsin Yeh
Morrison Professor in History & Director, Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley sha@berkeley.edu

This special issue stems from a panel organized by Christian Henriot and presented at the Association for Asian Studies in San Francisco (2006). All contributors examine pictorial, especially photographed images of Chinese subjects that were produced in the first half of the twentieth century. Drawing on a large body of visual materials, the essays offer rich descriptions of a broad range of everyday scenes and experiences about Chinese cities, streets, shops, theaters, movies, posters, newspapers, advertisements and magazines as gleaned from multifarious sources. As a collection, the papers celebrated the sound, color, taste, mood and movement of anonymous multitudes that had pursued lost missions on a once glamorous historical stage.

All authors, meanwhile, share a central methodological question. In what way, the papers ask, does a study centered upon pictorial images, themselves artifacts of specific time and place, facilitate or enable new approaches in historical thinking? The contributors note, that it is common practice in historical writings to include images for purposes of illustration upon the completion of a historical project based upon textual research. Yet it is well known that pictures contain compositional and communicative principles that are different from those operative in written texts. When a large amount of pictorial documents became available as in the case of China in the first half of the twentieth century, how do we make effective use of these sources for historical research without writing histories of the pictures themselves? How does a heightened awareness of the visual dimensions of past experiences, accompanied by a sophisticated understanding of the use of visual technology, help us approach history in a new way?
Barbara Mittler's essay, on the advertisement pages of Shanghai's leading newspaper *Shenbao* in the 1930s, takes up the issue of the visual composition of the printed press, and draws attention to the pictorial guides and spatial signposts that disciplined the eyes of the readers. Mittler's pictures were both embedded in lined texts and detached from them. In these pictures, commercial drawings advertising machine-manufactured goods sought to project enduring reliability while at the same time enticing the buyers with suggestions of cutting-edge originality. Through a close examination of the visual dynamics of the advertising images in print, Mittler's essay captures the restless and unquiet world of the ever-changing consumption of modernity that was laid before the urban audience.

Anne Kerlan-Stephens's paper, on the images of three Lianhua actresses on and off screen, examines not only film clips but also stills and photographs that appeared in posters and movie magazines. Shanghai audience experienced their film icons both as actresses in motion pictures and as photographed images in print. The varying modes of representation separating the films from the photographs invited different practices of visual consumption in and outside the theater. How the film studio learned to manage the diverging capacities of the motion pictures versus the printed pages in image production is a central focus of Kerlan-Stephens's analysis.

Catherine Yeh's paper, on Mei Lanfang, the Peking opera star, examines hundreds of Mei's photographs that were products of artful posing and careful staging for the purpose of promotion. The scripted pictures, presumably scenes from the operas, were in fact far detached from the live performances. When touring abroad in Japan, the United States and the Soviet Union, it was these images, removed from their theatrical contexts and attached to national narratives, which both fashioned and conformed to foreign productions of the images of China.

Feng Yi's paper, on the work of the photographer Hedda Morrison and the hundred-odd shots she took of shop signs, vividly reconstructs, through the sheer volume of the images, the visual dynamics in Beiping commercial streets in the 1920s. Robert Bickers's paper, on the personal photographs of a low-ranking British policeman in Shanghai, permits an unprecedented glimpse into the life and work of a colonial agent through his family album. Unlike the other essays, Feng and Bickers examined the works of professional and amateur photographers whose pictures were none other than the records of their movements through time and space, camera in hand.

Productive usage of visual documents thus needs to go beyond a mere attention to simple images. It is rewarding to consider the technology and