

BOOK REVIEWS

A Story of Ruins: Presence and Absence in Chinese Art and Visual Culture. By Wu Hung. London: Reaktion Books, 2012. Pp. 293. £40.00.

Gazing at the smouldering remains of the city of Luoyang, devastated by warfare during the fall of the Han dynasty, the poet Cao Zhi 曹植 (192–232) grieved over what he saw:

In Luoyang how still it is!
Palaces and houses all burnt to ashes,
Walls and fences all broken and gaping,
Thorns and brambles shooting up to the sky.

Cao Zhi's poem, quoted near the opening of Wu Hung's book (p. 18), was an early masterpiece of a genre of poetry known as *huaigu* 懷古 or "lamenting the past" that has endured throughout the history of Chinese literature. Writing in this genre, poets meditate on the losses and erasures caused by human conflict or, more rarely, by natural disaster at sites where cities or great temples once stood. What these poets do not describe in their *huaigu* verses are collapsed columns of marble or limestone, fragmentary stone vaults, or jumbled piles of overgrown brick or masonry—the types of architectural ruins that attracted writers and painters, especially during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in Europe. Fascinated by the radically different nature of ruins and representations of them in China and Europe, Wu Hung set out to explore the history of ruins in the visual arts of China; the result is this book, which analyses works of literature, painting, and architecture, as well as photographs, films, installations, and performance art of recent decades. Although at some points in the book Wu Hung's expansive definition of what constitutes a ruin stretches this organizing concept to the breaking point and beyond, the reader willingly follows Wu's wide-ranging meditations on this fascinating subject.

Wu Hung begins his first chapter, "Internalizing Ruins: Premodern Sensibilities of Time Passed," by reporting his surprise that a survey of images of ruins in Chinese painting he carried out yielded almost no results, confirming that nothing comparable to the vast inventory of European images of ruins existed in China. It was this discovery that inspired him to write a book that would challenge conventional ideas about ruins, shaped almost entirely by European experience. One might note at this point that even a scholar as sophisticated as Wu Hung could be seen to have slipped into the normalizing habits he seeks to disrupt: why, after all, should one *expect* to

find images of ruins in China or be surprised by their absence without taking the European model as the norm?

Two Chinese terms, *qiu* 丘, which can refer to a mound where a building once stood, and *xu* 墟, which signifies a waste or void, come closest in meaning to the English word “ruin,” which Wu Hung notes is rooted in the idea of “falling” and is closely associated with fallen stones. The most fundamental difference between the sites designated by the Chinese terms and European ruins can be accounted for by differences of building materials. Generally, Chinese buildings were fashioned from wooden columns and beams and terracotta roof tiles; owing to fires, earthquakes, and storms, few traces of ancient buildings remain above ground in China. Important buildings and monuments in Europe and in the Near East, from antiquity onward, were built of stone; countless structures of great age, though damaged by the passage of time, can still be seen, and impressive remains of collapsed stone buildings are strewn across the Mediterranean world and all parts of Europe.

This simple fact goes a long way to explain the failure of Wu Hung’s search for traditional Chinese paintings of ruined buildings: such works don’t exist because there were few ancient ruins of this kind in China to paint. A rare example of a painting of a ruin, by Shitao 石濤 (1642–1707), which Wu Hung illustrates (fig. 43), depicts two men gazing at a decayed *pailou* 牌樓 gateway, a type of structure that often was made of stone. Monuments such as Buddhist pagodas, spirit road statues, and foundations of palaces and their railings also were made of stone and survived, often in ruined condition, over many centuries, and there were plenty of old, run-down wooden structures to be seen during all periods. Wu Hung speculates that ruined structures, whatever the material from which they were built, were rarely depicted because such imagery would have been considered inauspicious. More profoundly, Wu Hung argues, it was not the physical remains of ancient buildings that evoked *huaigu* sentiments in poetry or in painting; rather it was the poet’s or artist’s subjective psychological responses to them that were important: poems and paintings gave form to an inner world of emotions and historical memory rather than representing the external reality of a collapsed building or damaged monument. Wu Hung cites as examples paintings of the Red Cliff, site of a famous battle in antiquity and of poetic excursions immortalized by Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037–1101) in the eleventh century: physical evidence of the battle had long disappeared by Su Shi’s time, erased just as completely as were traces of Su’s visits after his lifetime; yet the Red Cliff, rich in historic and literary associations, continued to inspire painters throughout history. In some cases, only an artist’s inscription indicates that buildings he represents are ruined. This is the case with Shitao’s *Qingliang Terrace* 清涼臺 of around 1700 (fig. 1). Only by reading his inscription does the viewer learn that the depicted buildings, which look well maintained, have “broken roofs.” Wu Hung

does not cite it, but a classic essay on the city of Suzhou by Frederick Mote makes very similar points. In China, Mote argues, the past was embodied in words, not monuments or artefacts. When old buildings fell into disrepair they were rebuilt and the old names retained. The past, in Mote's analysis, was embodied in literary rather than architectural form.¹

Buildings of stone were rare, but inscribed limestone steles were ubiquitous in China. A well-preserved ancient stele is not really a ruin—it is simply very old; bearing a text that is itself an historical document, a stele, whatever its age, inevitably stirs thoughts of the past that are at the heart of the *huaigu* genre. Wu Hung devotes part of his first chapter to analysis of a painting attributed to Li Cheng 李成 (919–967) titled *Reading the Stele* (fig. 17). In this haunting work, a traveller mounted on a donkey pauses to read a stele in a desolate grove of gnarled ancient trees. The stele, Wu Hung proposes, “denotes the past but does not represent it,” while the trees, living survivors of uncountable winters, are emblematic of enduring memory passed from generation to generation. This dichotomy, between history and memory, is based on the theories of Pierre Nora, which Wu Hung effectively deploys in this chapter. What is hard to accept, however, is Wu's characterization of a withered tree as a “particular kind of ruin” (p. 41). However scarred by the passage of time, trees are living things, their enduring connection to the past unbroken, as Wu Hung himself notes, by the finality of destruction signified by a ruined building. Perhaps one can speak of an ancient tree as a ruin only in loosely metaphoric terms, as when age, illness, or injury is said to make of a person's visage a “ruin” of its former self.

In another section of his enlightening but loosely organized first chapter, Wu Hung turns to the subject of rubbings. Taken from the surface of an engraved stele, a rubbing constitutes what Wu Hung calls a “surrogate ruin.” Carefully preserved rubbings index and preserve the moment in the history of the physical condition of the stele when the rubbing was made, even as the original stone monument exposed to the elements erodes or suffers vandalization. Rubbings themselves become *yiwu* 遺物 or “remnant things,” inspiring not only antiquarian research but also nostalgic longing for the past, as when the widowed poetess Li Qingzhao 李清照 (1084–1155) lamented the loss of the rubbing collection she had formed with her late husband.

Chapter Two, “The Birth of Ruins: Inventing a Modern Visual Culture in China,” carries Wu Hung's argument in a surprising new direction. He makes the case that the development of imagery of ruins in China can be traced to the dissemination of European depictions of old Chinese buildings. Although William Chambers (1723–1796), who became the foremost authority on Chinese architecture in eighteenth-

¹ Frederick W. Mote, “A Millennium of Chinese Urban History: Form, Time, and Space Concepts in Soochow,” *Rice University Studies* 59, no. 4 (Fall 1973), pp. 35–65.

century Europe, had travelled to China, his report that ruined buildings were essential elements of Chinese garden design was pure fantasy. The availability in Europe of accurate visual information about the built environment of China began to increase greatly in the late eighteenth century. William Alexander (1767–1816), a young artist attached to Lord Macartney’s diplomatic mission to the Manchu court, produced a series of watercolour paintings reproduced as book illustrations based on sites he visited in China. Among these were scenes of old gardens, weathered city gates, and decaying pagodas on the roofs of which small trees grow—images that appealed to European taste for chinoiserie and for the picturesque.

More influential and more widely disseminated were photographs of old Chinese buildings taken by Europeans such as John Thomson (1837–1921) and Felice Beato (1832–1909), beginning in the mid-nineteenth century. Some of the images by these photographers that Wu Hung illustrates raise the nagging question, never fully answered in this book, of what constitutes a ruin. What state of dilapidation must a building or monument reach before it can properly be called ruinous rather than just shabby and run-down? In her book on literary representations of ruins, quoted by Wu Hung, Inger Sigrun Brodey wrote that an ideal ruin “must be grand enough in stature to suggest what it once *was*, and, at the same time, decayed enough to show that it no longer is” (p. 22). Is the bronze pavilion at the Summer Palace seen in John Thomson’s photograph of *c.* 1868 a ruin (fig. 71)? The terrace on which the building stands is strewn with broken tiles and overgrown with weeds, which also have taken root on the lower of the building’s two roofs; but the structure itself looks sound, and whatever its state of preservation when Thomson photographed it, the pavilion had no claims to great antiquity, having been constructed little more than a century earlier.

Although the pictorialist effects of photographs made by Europeans in China linked them to earlier paintings of Chinese scenes by foreign artists, the new technology, in Wu Hung’s words, “gradually transformed the visual mode of *huaigu* from a psychological and a metaphorical one to a physical and representational one” (p. 112). As knowledge of photography spread, Chinese themselves began to make pictures that for the first time made the subject of ruins a part of the larger visual culture of China. Also in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, burgeoning art academies in China began to teach Western styles of painting based on observation of the real world, and old monuments such as pagodas entered the repertory of subjects taken up by artists trained in *plein air* sketching and oil painting. This cross-fertilization of artistic traditions, and of attitudes toward representations of ruins, entered a new stage when Chinese artists studying and working in Europe in the early decades of the twentieth century began to paint images of the Colosseum and other famous ruins. After a period of study in France and Italy, Pan Yuliang 潘玉良 (1895–

1977) returned to China and became a leading teacher of oil painting. Her painting of the pagoda on Tiger Hill outside Suzhou of 1932 (fig. 84) reflects, according to Wu Hung, “an artistic initiative to infuse the Western art form of oil painting with Chinese traits” (p. 117). That a pagoda, which had become a global symbol of China itself, should be the subject of a painting by Pan Yuliang is an example, Wu Hung argues, of “modern Chinese artists’ longing for a vanished past” (p. 117).

At some points the complexity of his arguments leads Wu Hung, whose prose usually is clear and readable, into a morass of academic jargon: he writes that “[t]ravelling multiple, heterosystems of representation, the image of the pagoda had now come to signify different subjectivities while generating meaning across cultural boundaries through repeated acts of translation and enunciation” (p. 120). I believe it would require the subtlety of a Parisian semiotician to decode this passage, the meaning of which escapes me.

It was not nostalgic reverie or longing for the past that pushed images of ruined buildings to the centre of Chinese visual culture in the twentieth century. After nearly a century of destructive encounters with Western powers that left the landscape of China marked by newly ruined sites, many of which were documented in photographs, shocking images of devastation inflicted by the Japanese invasion in the 1930s not only angered Chinese citizens but also strengthened their resolve to resist the enemy. The most famous of wartime photographs from China is a film still from footage shot by Wang Xiaoting 王小亭 (1900–1981) showing a crying baby during a Japanese bombing raid that destroyed the Shanghai South Railroad Station on August 28, 1937. Published in *Life* magazine a few weeks later, this heartbreaking picture was seen by an estimated 1.36 billion people. In addition to photographs, paintings in traditional ink and colours by veteran artists such as Gao Jianfu 高劍父 (1879–1951), as well as oil paintings by younger artists such as Wu Zuoren 吳作人 (1908–1997), depicted bombing raids and the shells of ruined Chinese cities.

Wu Hung draws a subtle and important distinction between idealized representations of ancient ruins and images of destruction caused by war. War ruins, he writes, reject “the sense of the passage of time”: the ruined buildings they show “are still raw, not yet having sunk into the depths of historical memory. We may thus call this kind of contemporary ruins ‘ashes’ to distinguish them from those artistic and aestheticized ruin images” (p. 133).

The ruins of the Yuanming Yuan 圓明園 or Garden of Perfect Brightness serve as what Wu Hung calls “a kind of degree zero for the reconceptualization of ruins in twentieth-century China” (p. 155). Constructed during the reigns of the Kangxi (r. 1662–1723), Yongzheng (r. 1723–1736), and Qianlong (r. 1736–1795) emperors, this pleasure park west of Beijing included replicas of famous gardens and scenic spots in various parts of China. The garden also contained an extraordinary group of

stone buildings in vaguely baroque and rococo styles designed by Jesuit missionaries at Qianlong's court. These Western-style buildings, known as the Xiyang Lou 西洋樓 or "European Palaces" were destroyed in 1860 by French and English troops during the Second Opium War. Unlike wooden Chinese buildings reduced to ashes by warfare, the structures designed and, ironically, burned by Europeans left behind great masses of collapsed stone walls and fallen balustrades; isolated columns that remained upright testified starkly to the grandeur of the lost buildings. The ruins of the Yuanming Yuan attracted the cameras of foreign photographers, who not only recorded the desolation of the Qing emperor's former pleasure grounds but also took photographs of foreigners holding convivial picnics amid the ruins. For patriotic Chinese, the ruins became a reminder of national shame and symbol of how China had suffered at the hands of foreign powers.

The ruins of the Yuanming Yuan, which Wu Hung introduces at the conclusion of his second chapter, form a bridge to the third chapter, "Between Past and Future: Transience as a Contemporary Aesthetic of Ruins," which deals with modern and contemporary art and film. Wu Hung describes how certain artists and writers, many of whom he has interviewed extensively over the years, were attracted to the Yuanming Yuan and made the ruins the subject of short stories, essays, and paintings, as well as the site of performances and informal meetings in the 1970s and 1980s, when the site seemed to evoke China's tragic recent history and the psychological pain of a generation that had just lived through the Cultural Revolution.

Perhaps the most rewarding section of the entire book is Wu Hung's analysis, at the beginning of this chapter, of a 1948 film by Fei Mu 費穆 (1906–1951), *Spring in a Small Town* (*Xiaocheng zhi chun* 小城之春). The film is set in the period immediately after the end of the Sino-Japanese war and follows the story of a love triangle that ends hopefully with a young wife's rekindled devotion to her husband, who is recovering from an illness. Much of the action takes place in and around the family's ruined home, where gunfire destroyed walls and roofs and the structure is barely habitable. The ruined house itself, as Wu Hung points out, becomes a presence in the film, almost like a living character in the drama. The city's old wall also is the setting for a number of scenes; whatever damage the wall suffered during the war, it has survived and represents a sense of continuity with the past. In the film's final scene, the couple stands on the wall looking toward the sunrise. As in other post-war representations, ruins from the past, according to Wu Hung "commingled a sense of ambiguity, openness and indeterminacy." No longer simply rallying points for nationalist sentiment, ruins could suggest endurance and hope for a brighter future.

Ruins had no place in the hearty imagery of state-sanctioned socialist-realist art of the 1950s and 1960s. With the liberalization policies of recent decades, and

with the astonishing burgeoning of contemporary art in China, which Wu Hung has done more than any other scholar in the West to chronicle, ruins have come to play a major role in the works of many artists. The destruction to which these artists have responded is not the result of warfare but of over-heated economic development: in Beijing, and in other cities, vast areas of old buildings have been reduced to rubble before being cleared away to make room for gleaming modernist skyscrapers and shopping malls. Among the most poignant of responses to this phenomenon are projects carried out by Song Dong 宋冬 (b. 1966) and his wife Yin Xiuzhen 尹秀珍 (b. 1963), who collected address plates and roof tiles from demolished houses and incorporated these derelict artefacts into installations that speak of the disruption of centuries-old patterns of urban life. Rong Rong 榮榮 (b. 1968) also has documented bizarre scenes of demolition that leave posters and photographs that once decorated the interiors of houses in Beijing exposed to the open air amid fallen bricks and heaps of broken roof tiles. Zhang Dali 張大力 (b. 1963) has entered into a dialogue with demolition sites, drawing a graffiti-like silhouette on walls about to be bulldozed. According to Zhang, the image is a condensation of his own likeness. "It stands in my place," he has said, "to communicate with this city" (p. 228).

In a short final chapter, "Coda: State Legacy," Wu Hung describes the transformation of what had been the ruin of an abandoned factory east of Beijing into the 798 art district, the cavernous spaces put to new use as galleries and the former workshops reborn as chic cafés. Nothing, it seems, is more emblematic of the state of contemporary China than the capacity to discover in a ruined site a promising business opportunity which the development of 798 represents.

To my mind more fascinating than the giddy commercialism of 798 and its place in the world of contemporary Chinese art, and certainly more poignant, is a final instance of engagement with ruins that Wu Hung describes. When the municipal government of Beijing decided to preserve and restore part of the city wall, which dated from the Ming dynasty and which was torn down in the 1950s, citizens were asked to help locate bricks from the wall scattered around homes and workplaces. Bricks from demolished walls of other cities in Shanxi and Hebei were imported to supplement the more than 400,000 bricks donated by people in Beijing, yielding a partially restored ruin that is "half real and half artificial" (p. 253). An elderly man named Wei Jinshan made finding bricks from the Beijing wall a personal crusade and delivered contributions to the site regularly on his bicycle. Through his patient efforts, and those of thousands of other Beijing residents, the urban scar resulting from ruination of the wall, which had been one of the most memorable features of the capital, was partly healed.

Like every publication by this prolific author, *A Story of Ruins* brims with provocative ideas and surprising insights. It is not the most tightly organized of Wu

Hung's many books, and one suspects that at some points the concept of ruins was a fetter rather than a compelling thematic focus. What Wu Hung might have been seeking to elucidate is something grander than the history of ruins: behind this book, perhaps, is another, waiting to be written: a study of how human awareness of the passage of time was given form in Chinese art.

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The Discovery of Chinese Logic. By Joachim Kurtz. Leiden: Brill, 2011. Pp. xiv + 471. €161.00/\$221.00.

Introduced by Wang Guowei's 王國維 characterization of the turn of the twentieth century as the "age of discovery," this impressive work is an account of the Chinese discovery of "Western knowledge." Kurtz characterizes the process metaphorically as a change in the "discursive landscape," loosely the "conversion" of intellectuals to the norms of Western philosophical thought. Western thinkers divided "thought" (學 *xué*^{learning} not 心理 *xīnlǐ*^{psychology process}) into philosophy and religion. By Wang's "age," it became a tripartite division including science. Of the three manifestations of "love of wisdom," philosophers distinguished their thought using concepts of *reason* or *logic* vs. faith and experiment. Chinese "conversion" to the logical strain of thought began with religion advocates (Jesuits) was later made urgent by impacts of science (Western military technology) and completed by returned overseas students (Liang Qichao 梁啟超, Hu Shi 胡適 . . .).

Kurtz plots this "discursive" conversion by focusing on translation processes and outcomes. One cannot help but be struck by the parallel of the third century's process of translating Buddhism and blending it into the Classical Chinese discursive landscape by a process barely accessible today. One could only wish for a similarly impressively detailed account of that prior *Discovery!*

Kurtz's unpacks his ambiguous title as (1) Chinese discovery of (Western) logic and (2) Chinese discovery of Chinese logic. He addresses what I will call the *historical* issue, i.e. whether the change effected by the discovery of Western logic was necessary for the second discovery? I would restate (1) as the discovery of the strand of thought defined by the centrality of logic, i.e. Western philosophy and I would note that (2) begs a controversial philosophical question—was there Chinese logic? Or might the "discovery" be widely, but falsely, believed, an *invention*? The