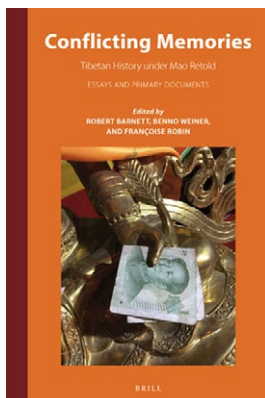


Book Reviews



BARNETT, Robert, Benno WEINER, and Françoise ROBIN (eds.). 2020. *Conflicting Memories: Tibetan History under Mao Retold. Essays and Primary Documents*. Leiden: Brill.

FABIENNE JAGOU

With 13 chapters featuring 15 illustrations (excerpts from books, film dialogues, interviews, etc., translated from Tibetan or Chinese), the book focuses on three events marking contemporary Tibetan history: the Chinese Army's arrival in Kham (1935-1936), the imposition of so-called democratic reforms (1955-1956 in Kham, 1958 in Amdo, and 1959 in Lhasa), and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). It is structured in five major parts offering new analyses rereading published official texts (Part One) and archives (Part Two), oral collections of memories (Part Three), and the rewriting of literary secular (Part Four) and religious events (Part Five). The chapters are mainly based on written or oral testimonies, biographies, and autobiographies of the laity (Horlemann, Mortensen, Mackley, and de Heering) or monks (Willock, Turek, and Barstow). Others present accounts of particular events by civil servants or anonymous people, such as *Materials for the Study of Culture and History* (*Bod kyi lo rgyus rig gnas/Wenshi ziliao* 文史資料) of Qinghai (Weiner) and central Tibet (Travers), Chinese filmography on Tibet (Barnett), and literature concerning the 1958 Amdo rebellion (Robin). Tsering's chapter considers the evolution of Chinese and Tibetan opinions on the actions and personality of Ngawang Jigme (1910-2009), who played a major political role from 1950 onward. Another chapter offers a reinterpretation of CCP ambitions in 1949 based on recently unveiled Chinese archives (Raymond). All chapters show the changes and continuities in the historical interpretation of events that marked the twentieth century's second half, attested in post-1949 Chinese writings on Tibet. They reveal elements that oral history illustrates as a counterpoint to an agreed official Chinese history.

The stories analysed testify to an experience lived almost 60 years earlier in the case of the most recent events. They refer to an intergenerational transmission by the oldest and to a writing

practice intended to fill the silence of a generation. They thus convoke accounts of events witnessed by the author, the ones they heard about, and those that now await discussion. These testimonies highlight the urgent need for Tibetans to write their own history of contemporary events in order to be able to rebuild themselves as individuals and as groups in given geographical settings.

The book's editors are right in using "re" in prefixing its parts: "Revisualisations" (Part One), "Rereading" (Part Two), "Remembering" (Parts Three and Five), and "Retellings" (Part Four). This underlines the importance of testimony and oral history in comparison with official history, and also of the narrative methods authors and interviewees adopt in a context that hardly gives scope for it. The first accounts gathered in the framework of the collection *Materials for the Study of Tibetan Culture and History* came from civil or military officers and fulfilled the various objectives of Chinese policies. Articles published in the collection's first volumes on Qinghai, for example, aimed at fashioning a new Tibet different from the old Tibetan society whereas the more recent ones pursued the building of an imaginary past. Nevertheless, the objective of these official collections was to create a shared memory based on accounts gathered from officials and under controlled conditions. Thus, they form part of so-called official history.

The book's contributors give readers translated raw sources and content analyses while noting limitations linked to censorship and publishing environment in China. They offer writings transmitting the words of unnamed people who, without acrimony and eschewing discussion of the legitimacy of Chinese presence in Tibet, narrate events that marked their childhood or adult life. These documents, public or private, display strategies that enable them to appear and be considered as fiction, biography, or autobiography (for example, the absence of retrospective elements, narrating facts from a child's perspective, or using the passive voice). None criticises the events or challenges China's authority. The last three chapters focusing on the memories of monks show how they took advantage of imprisonment and hardship to practise their faith. The book brilliantly demonstrates the complementarity between official accounts (given the roles of the authors and the context of their writings) and those of ordinary people to better understand contemporary Tibetan history and the divergent historical interpretations (Chinese and Tibetan, as well as between protagonists, actors, and witnesses).

While some chapters lack inquiry and reflexivity over the circumstances of the testimonies' disclosures or of Tibetan accounts, and, *in fine*, over discourses coproduced by the researchers' requests, the book is most important for understanding the current Tibetan situation. This volume's contributors are themselves witnesses, albeit surrogates giving voice to Tibetan ones, fuelled by the urgency to bear witness.

Translated by N. Jayaram.

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YAPP, Hentyle. 2021.
*Minor China: Method,
Materialisms, and the Aesthetic.*
Durham: Duke University Press.

LINZHI ZHANG

This book rethinks the relationship between the political and the aesthetic in contemporary Chinese art, against the dominant narratives that render non-Western art eligible through the logics of liberalism and capitalism. Indeed, the image of dissidents resisting an authoritarian state dominates the Western reception of contemporary Chinese art. It has been a major concern for art historians to discuss the depoliticised stories and multiple aesthetics in contemporary Chinese art (e.g. Wu and Wang 2010; Wang 2020). On the other hand, in area studies, how to make the non-West eligible without falling back to the Western-centric discourses is a persistent and crucial methodological question. Addressing alternative readings of contemporary Chinese art, this book assigns itself a crucial task central to both bodies of scholarship.

Although *Minor China* is not a straightforward title, the introduction immediately makes it clear what “minor” means in contrast to “major” and why it is crucial to think minor. The “major” approach is a materialist framework that reduces culture to its political and economic base, reproducing “liberal and recognisable understanding of the non-West” (p. 3). The minor as method is, by contrast, to hesitate from this dominant reading and attend to “the nuanced and vibrant intricacies” (p. 6) in art, such as “form, affect, nonvisual senses, nonanthropocentric objects, and speculation” (p. 10). As the theoretical backing of this method, the author refers to numerous theoretical traditions, including Marxism, new materialism, object-oriented ontology, Francophone metaphysical thought, Black feminist theory, and many others.

The book has five chapters, each with its own theoretical

agenda. The first chapter aims to “produce a theory of the aesthetic for its relation to the political beyond a model of liberalism” (p. 34). The second chapter minors the liberal logics of inclusion through a leftist and Marxist understanding of inclusion. The third chapter engages with the debate on universality and particularity and questions why this debate recurs. The fourth chapter discusses subject and agency in Chinese performance art. While these four chapters attempt to achieve their goals through alternative readings of artwork by high-profile Chinese artists such as Cai Guoqiang 蔡国强, Ai Weiwei 艾未未, Zhang Huan 張洵, and Cao Fei 曹斐, the fifth chapter turns to the British artist Isaac Julien’s work *Ten Thousand Waves*. It is, however, a sound choice as the work was a response to the tragic death of Chinese migrants working as cockle pickers in the United Kingdom in 2004. Through the Black artist’s engagement with objectification of Chinese women, the author examines “the grand notions of totality and social structuration” (p. 35).

Despite its important task and ambitious programme, the book suffers from a few major problems that are likely rooted in the author’s preoccupation with theories and failure to synthesise the various theoretical strands he continuously draws in. The first consequence of such preoccupation is that theories often override the formal analysis of artwork, rendering the interpretation of artwork often far-fetched and detached from the work’s formal elements. For instance, in Chapter Four, the author thinks the figure of Mazu 媽祖 in Julien’s *Ten Thousand Waves* was the equivalent of what Benjamin saw as the angel of history in Paul Klee’s painting, but no formal resemblance between Paul Klee’s and Isaac Julien’s work is discussed. Throughout this chapter, the author claims that Julien “was informed by,” “reconfigures,” or “intermingles with” (p. 185-6) theoretical concerns central to this chapter, but these concerns are not evidenced by the artist’s own accounts or the formal elements of the artwork. The general impression is that the author’s agency has overridden the artist’s and the work’s. For this reason, the book may be less exciting for those whose primary interest is contemporary art.

Second, as the author constantly brings in new concepts, it is hard for the reader to see a coherent framework. Take Chapter Four as an example, which sets out to minor the understanding of Chinese artists as “herculean, conscious subjects resisting the authoritarian state” (p. 141). To rework the notion of “subject,” the author draws upon Rey Chow, and this guides the author to Jane Bennett’s critique of agency as demystification, which further prompts the introduction of Brecht’s theory of performativity and alienation effects (p. 148-51). As the author goes on, the snowball of concepts grows bigger. While I do admire the author’s strong theoretical literacy, I also wonder whether the reader would get easily disoriented. As stated at the beginning of this chapter, central to the author’s minor approach here are the concepts of “meditation” and “fabulation.” The former is an alternative term to “endurance,” which informs the dominant reading of Zhang Huan’s and He Chengyao’s 何成瑤 performance, and the latter can explain the detached performativity in Cao Fei’s work. A framework centring around these two concepts and their relation to subject and agency would probably have made this chapter more coherent.