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BOOK REVIEW

Anxiety Aesthetics. Maoist Legacies in China. 1978–1985

By Jennifer Dorothy Lee

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Quite a few articles and books have been written on the Chinese avant-garde art groups of the 1970s and 1980s, mostly from the perspective of art history, but telling us also about the surrounding political atmosphere, describing the struggles for political freedoms that the movement was connected to, such as the Democracy Wall, the independent journals, and the new spirit of enlightenment that had come over China's intellectuals.

What Jennifer Dorothy Lee is trying to give us is a much wider context, a theory describing the years of transition between Mao's China and the one known as the era of reform and opening associated with Deng Xiaoping. What happened in the early 1980s, writes Lee, was (not only in the field of arts), something in between the Mao era and what at one point she calls "the marketizing present" (p. 5). Lee does not agree with the assumption that post-Mao collective actions were "the signal of a nation's sudden release from radical political leftism and a repudiation of Maoist socialism" (p. 3). Even further, she says, "socialism is still with us in the present" (p. 5). In the light of such observations, Lee suggests a new periodisation: in the field of arts she sees the turning point only with the emergence of the "85 New Wave" ('85 新潮).

Lee is Associate Professor of East Asian Art in the Department of Art History, Theory, and Criticism at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Born in 1978, just around the time when most of the events she describes were taking place, she apparently grew up in the US, although she never reveals much detail about her background. For example, one doesn't find a CV in this book, and hardly any biographical details anywhere else.

So we do not know too much about what drove her to find interest in this early post-Mao rebellion, the "Beijing Spring" (*Beijing zhi chun* 北京之春) of 1978–1981, a period that has become a bit lost and forgotten in the realm of Chinese studies, superseded by the much bigger topics of the Tian'anmen revolt of 1989, the economic advances of China, and her rise to become a global power. Bringing these earlier developments back to our attention, and doing that in a rather new way, is certainly one of the achievements of this book.

The author develops most of her basic theories in the nineteen pages of the "Introduction" chapter (subtitled "Endings or Beginnings" accordingly). A short "Conclusion" of five pages at the end mainly refers to some follow-ups on what has happened in Chinese society more recently: the Covid experience, the dramatic events in Hong Kong, or – relating more directly to the early avant-garde art – a surprising commemorative exhibition on the Stars art group at the OCAT Institute in Beijing in 2019 (but unfortunately without going into details).

In the five chapters between the Introduction and the Conclusion, Jennifer Dorothy Lee conveys to us an enormous amount of details, anecdotes, remarks, and quotations (27 pages of bibliographical notes!) on the Beijing Spring and the avant-garde arts movement and its aftermaths. The chapters may have been chosen a bit arbitrarily (personalities that Lee has met and interviewed, or that have otherwise impressed her?), but they provide a wealth of evaluations and elements of the internal Chinese debates during that period.

They take us from "Democracy Walls" to "Memorializing Huang Rui's Beijing" (Lee calls this portrait of the co-founder of the "Stars Art Group" 星星畫會 "a case study" [p. 17]), then to the artist and art theoretician Wu Guanzhong 吳冠中 (1919–2010) who published essays on "abstract beauty" during 1979 and 1980. In chapter four, Lee takes up the "visual diary" (a series of small texts accompanied by drawings) of Qu Leilei 曲磊磊 (born 1951), another key artist and eyewitness of the "Stars" and the Beijing Spring. And the last chapter discusses the well-known artist and literary critic Liu Zaifu 劉再複 (born 1941) who wrote a famous essay "On Literary Subjectivity" in 1985 (*Lun wenxue de zhutixing* 論文學的主體性).

But what is it after all that Lee calls "Anxiety Aesthetics" as in the title of her book? Her main thesis is that the political activists of the Beijing Spring as well as the "Stars" artists never succeeded in breaking with the Maoist or socialist past, but represented in some ways a continuation of the ideas and forms of this revolutionary period, even when they attempted to emancipate themselves from it. Also, by trying to negate Mao and socialism, they still remained tied to this past, to its theories and some of its practices.

The notion of "anxiety" seems more difficult to define and to understand than "aesthetics". When we ask Google for synonyms for "anxiety", we obtain quite a number of expressions that correspond to this key word of Lee's text, such as "nervousness", "worry", "concern", "unease", "apprehension", "disquiet", "fretfulness", "angst", and "fear", or as Lee puts it, "(a)nxiety in this book ...codifies the worries and troubles, the doubts and vacillations, the bitter disquiet of a collective crisis consciousness shaped over generations of twentieth-century Chinese modernity constituted, in large part, by serial revolution" (p. 13).

When Lee uses "aesthetics", she also wants to apply this notion in a much broader sense, not restricted to the arts, but also as a "strategy of radical leftism and a repudiation of Maoist socialism" in general, as an "ideological transformation among the masses, among intellectuals and everyday folks alike" (p. 11). "Anxiety Aesthetics" is thus defined by Lee as "a structure of consciousness" in the post-Mao years at the end of the 1970s "fuelling generative social movements in creative practice, while endlessly self-deferring" (p. 10).

The author draws a direct line from "strategies of collective action and grassroots organization established during Mao-era campaigns" (p. 17), such as *dazibao* 大字報 ("big character posters"), *xiaozibao* 小字報 ("small character posters", like dazibao, but on much smaller sheets of paper) and *minkan* 民刊 ("citizens' publications" – independent, usually mimeographed journals), to those employed by the Beijing Spring activists and artists without their being really conscious of such a link.

As for the arts, Lee sees "spaces of expression that remain conditioned ... by earlier socialist and Maoist projects" and that even "contradict the intentions of the artists and thinkers" (p. 5). The Stars artists, Lee remarks, were still discussing Marx and socialist aesthetics at that time (p. 9), and like the political activists they often "treat[ed] socialism ... as a prospect still unrealized" (p. 10).

Here we come to the essence of Lee's arguments, at what she calls the "anxiety aesthetics", art (and literature) that is exploring something new, sometimes taking up ideas from the past or from other

cultures, but remaining deeply rooted in the Maoist era, either by continuing to be influenced by some of its ideas, or by an explicit and elaborate negation of the principles of that era. Often, says Lee, there is "no clear-cut rejection of the Mao era in the works and writings of transitional artist and intellectuals" (p. 6), "to the contrary," she says, it is "an ending without closure, a rupture shorn of heroic new beginnings" (p. 6).

During the five succeeding chapters, Jennifer Dorothy Lee mainly refers to examples that seem to underline this theoretical frame, and to the rich debates among Chinese intellectuals and art critics up to the appearance of new generations of modern artists.

Lee first tells us about the Xidan Democracy Wall (*Xidan minzhuqiang* 西單民主牆) in Beijing that has received wide international attention. Foreign journalists, she says, created an impression that the Beijing Spring was a complete turnaround in Chinese politics and society, a break with the Maoist past, and she explains again why she will not accept this assumption.

In chapter two, which analyses how the leading "Stars" artist Huang Rui 黃銳 portrays the Xidan Wall in some of his sketches and oil paintings, Lee reminds us of a remarkable item among the Beijing Spring publications, a fictitious futuristic story by someone (still unknown hitherto!) who uses the pseudonym Su Ming 蘇明: "A tragedy that could happen in the year 2000" (*Keneng fasheng zai 2000 nian de beiju* 可能發生在 2000 年的悲劇). It was first published as a dazibao and then in the journal "Spring of Peking" 北京之春, somewhat reminding one (intentionally?) of George Orwell's *1984* (although Lee does not draw such a comparison in her text). After thirty years of reform and prosperity, so it goes, the heirs of the radical Maoist "Gang of Four" 四人幫 return to power after the death of a beloved "certain comrade", re-establishing a kind of Cultural Revolution regime, doing away with free speech at the Democracy Wall, and re-inventing the "old days". China's endless political cycle of opening up and tightening the strings thus begins anew (pp. 47–50). Many thanks to the author for recalling this fantastic piece of political fiction!

In chapter three, Jennifer Dorothy Lee focuses on intellectual debates on art and literature during that time, notably on Wu Guanzhong's broad reflections on beauty and abstraction, "abstraction" perceived as a mental process, "a mode of thought" (p. 75), and not just a concept of art history.

Chapter four analyses "The Serial Images of Qu Leilei", artistic combinations of texts and drawn images dating from 1983, from the time of the Anti-Spiritual Pollution campaigns after the Beijing Spring, with sarcastic allusions to the "sun" (a metaphor for Mao), especially in a sequence called "The Sun of My Dreams" (*Mengzhong de Taiyang* 夢中的太陽), originally not intended for exhibition or publication. Again Lee remarks that post-Mao transitions "more often than not, remained shackled to the past" (p. 100).

The last chapter dives deeply into the philosophical debates of the 1950s and 60s, arriving at Liu Zaifu's essay on literary subjectivity written during the early years of the reform era. Liu, defined as a "state intellectual" by Lee, "remained dedicated to issues of the socialist and Marxian aesthetic of the time", but somehow tried to adapt to the reform era (p. 131).

So what can we eventually take home from reading Lee's text? "I focus less on object-orientated approaches to works of art", but more "on a holistic portrait" (p. 5), taking up the discourse and "intellectual history" around the artistic and political developments during this era, writes Jennifer Dorothy Lee in her introduction. "I aim to provoke fresh thought on a singular historical moment that has been less examined in the years bridging the Mao era with Dengist reforms." This is a promise she has certainly kept with her book, although it is not always easy to follow the highly branched structure of her arguments and the many detours to other interesting topics.

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