

CONSTRUCTING RUINS: NEW URBAN AESTHETICS IN CHINESE ART AND CINEMA

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Abstract

This paper discusses the social, philosophical and aesthetic significance of modern ruins, and conceptualizes ruin aesthetics with examples taken from a selection of contemporary Chinese photographic art works and films. By contrasting modern, uncanny ruin aesthetics with classical Chinese landscape aesthetics, this paper focuses on examining changing aesthetics in modern Chinese art and cinema, and suggests a shift in the way Chinese people perceive the world, and the relationship between human beings and the environment; from focusing on the pursuit of man-nature unity to exposing disunity, disorder and disintegration in the modern world.

However, by examining attempts of contemporary artists and filmmakers to combine these two contradictory aesthetics, this paper puts forward the aesthetic concept of the “uncanny *yijing*”, which defines the dual, hybrid aesthetics found in the representations of modern ruins, embodying all the contradictions one could find in China under rapid modernisation and spatial transformations. Since harmony between humans and the environment can no longer be represented in contemporary texts, it is suggested that contemporary artists find ways to juxtapose the ruins with (fabricated) natural landscapes, in order to re-appropriate the unity and *yijing* one finds in classical Chinese landscape paintings, while at the same time exposing the negative consequences of global capitalism, excessive urbanization and modernisation for the natural environment in China today.

Introduction

Travelling in China today, one of the first impressions that the traveller gets is of the phenomenal extent to which cities have transformed, in barely more than two decades, since the economic reform of the 1980s. In many cities, large and small, much has been done by the municipalities to replicate the greenery and garden city effect of Singapore. On closer observation, however, one cannot avoid seeing sights of ruins in the form of aborted constructions amongst the high-rises, or vacated industrial buildings along city approaches.

As Sheldon Lu explains: “*Chai-na* (literally, “tearing down”) has become a common phenomenon of urban development in China as we witness the destruction of old buildings and the construction of new structures wherever we go in a Chinese city.”¹ In the name of economic development and as a process of mass population migration, extensive demolitions of older buildings occur daily. Ruins have become a familiar sight in Chinese cities.

This paper begins by identifying the social, cultural and philosophical significances modern ruins have in defining urban landscapes in contemporary China; how the ruins are represented in Chinese visual culture; and how they are turned into aestheticised spaces which alter people's concepts of beauty, time and space, development and progress. "Ruin aesthetics" may be defined as an aesthetic experience of the fusion of the vitality of fragmentation, degradation or decay as an element of the beauty of *yijing*. By contrasting "ruin aesthetics" in contemporary art and cinema with traditional Chinese landscape aesthetics, this paper suggests there is a changing relationship between modern humans and the environment that moves from unity to disunity. This disunity and disintegration between man and the world leads to discussion of the representation of ruins using psychoanalytic concepts such as the uncanny, and the positioning of the self and the other. Having conceptualized ruin landscapes, I argue that in recent years, Chinese artists and filmmakers have attempted to adopt the two conflicting aesthetics in their works, so as to visualise all the contradictions in the representation of spatial ruins.

Representing Modern Ruins: The "Modern Ruin" Subculture

Be it bombed-out structures formed during wars and battles, industrial derelicts and tunnels beneath metropolitan cities, or abandoned buildings left behind during periods of urban development and social change, man-made environments which we label "ruins" are usually embedded with numerous negative connotations. They are perceived as places with all sorts of hidden dangers such as crime and vice, and are thus commonly referred to as spaces of destruction, disorder, disintegration and decay. In recent years, however, despite the notion that these spaces are still very much considered useless and undesirable, the ruin is gaining significance in various aspects, both as an actual architectural space as well as through popular representations in global cultural artifacts. With an ever accelerating rate of development and migration, there will only be more and more things to leave behind. It is claimed that we have gradually entered "an unexpected golden age for dereliction".²

Visual representations of modern ruins are circulated through books, films, advertisements, photographic art and paintings, whereas different cultural phenomena are generated from the growing obsession with visiting derelict sites, as seen in the worldwide "urban exploration", a subculture coined in 1996 by Jeff Chapman.³ The phrase refers to the investigation and exploration of the man-made places ignored, abandoned and largely unseen by the public.

By restricting the subject in focus to "contemporary" ruins, this paper excludes ancient historical sites such as the Great Wall of China, or remains of derelict buildings formed as a result of natural disasters, but will concentrate on industrial ruins – the unplanned, un-intentioned, miscarried

or abandoned children, the by-products deliberately produced as a result of global capitalist development and urban area reconstruction - to argue that representations of these spaces have turned "ruins" into aestheticised subjects, altering people's way of viewing time and space, as well as capitalist progress and development.

Material Excess and Society in Transition

In the 1980s, with China's doors re-opened to foreign investment, the entire nation was thrust into a frenzy of buying, selling and investing. For many entrepreneurs, real estate development, made possible by global capital flow, emerged as an attractive investment opportunity not to be missed. What followed were land purchases and clearances, causing the urban space to be destroyed at a rapid rate, and resulting in common sights of material excess in towns and cities. But in a matter of two decades, due to over investment, lack of sustainable financial backing and inconclusive debt disputes, numerous building construction projects were forced to stop. This left many unfinished buildings as ruins, scattered in city corners all over China. Amongst them are structures that have been abandoned for over a decade.

In 2006, Hong Kong artist Anothermountainman (*Youyishanren*, aka Stanley Wong) made repeated visits to aborted buildings in different Chinese cities and produced a series of photographs using aborted buildings as subject matter.⁴ By suitably positioning his camera, he created settings which harmoniously mixed the virtual and the real, blending the vibrant cityscape outside into the interior of the aborted building structures. Through the use of appropriate sitters and associated decors, his photos present different stories of people's life experiences in a rapidly changing China.

One of Anothermountainman's photos, *Lanwei 5/ Big Business* (2006) portrays a well-dressed middle-aged man in a western suit, sitting on a sturdy-looking safe in an empty aborted building with his head down. The picture shows him staring fixedly at a pulled out paper roll, presumably of printed accounts, pondering. Above him on a bare concrete beam hangs an expensive crystal chandelier and a classic table lamp is shown prominently placed in the foreground, but these lights are unlit. The neatly framed Chinese characters above his head are normally displayed to wish entrepreneurs success in enterprise. Their prominence in the picture serves an opposite role, mocking the bursting of the economic bubble and the evaporation of the man's grandiose dream.

Fly Away shows a lonely young woman sitting on a model globe in an empty aborted building gazing into the distant city beyond. Behind her in a dark corner we see a larger globe in a strong, three-legged stand faintly illuminated by a free standing floor lamp nearby. The picture purports to reveal the dream of modern Chinese women to explore the outside world, yet they find themselves confined in a restrictive China.



Lanwei 5/ Big Business, Another mountainman, 2006, Guangzhou, China.

In Another mountainman's photographs, through the use and arrangement of modern household furniture and decor such as sofas, lamps and carpets in a number of aborted buildings,

he shows disharmony and conflict in the settings. His works also reveal how material excess, as a product of global capitalist development, reflects present day human conditions in a society under rapid transformation.

On the other hand, ruin aesthetics found in contemporary Chinese photography and film bears a strong resemblance to Western social realist traditions. Socialist realism is commonly seen in a number of important artistic movements in the 19th and 20th centuries, emerging at times of social unrest and economic depression, such as in the United States during the Great Depression of the 1930s. These paintings focus on realistic depiction of social and economic hardships experienced by the poor and the working class, and often present social and political commentary or criticism of authorities and elite classes at the time. As a response to rapid economic development and social transformation in the past few decades, contemporary Chinese artists and filmmakers exhibit social realist tendencies and concerns for social and environmental problems in general. Works often portray individuals caught up in poverty and loss of homeland when old districts are redeveloped, expressing a sense of hopelessness. These individual lives have been given visual expression through true-to-life realism and acute social perception, resembling that of European social realist arts of the 19th century.

In Wang Qingsong's photography art piece *Vagabond* (aka *Tramp*), he fabricates a seemingly real scene of two beggars lying among heaps of rubbish and waste, their eyes dull and transfixed. Without clothing, they keep warm by covering themselves with waste pieces that are symbolic icons of western consumerism, such as Coke Cola and Fedex cartons.⁵ By their sides are part consumed water melons and some loose bank notes. *Vagabond* reveals and criticizes the adverse consequences, such as the production of material waste and a widening rich-poor divide, of global capitalism and excessive consumerism in contemporary society.

"Ruin Aesthetics" in Contemporary Art and Cinema

As a visual signifier for different forms of disorder, disintegration and decay, the ruin has often been the subject of aesthetic criticism. It has been quoted in a report of the Civic Trust of Britain that an abandoned industrial ruin "not only looks depressing", but also "tends to attract fly tipping, graffiti and flyer posting, all of which 'uglify' the environment."⁶ However, the boundaries between beauty and ugliness can often be blurred, as the two concepts are merely subjective judgements determined by dominant ideologies. In recent decades, the ruin is becoming a popular subject for creative artistic expressions, commonly represented in paintings, photographic art and films, and has inspired a good number of artists (Yao Lu, Yang Yi, Zhang Dali, Anothermountainman, Edward Burtynsky) and filmmakers (Jia Zhangke, Wang Bing) to explore the social significance and symbolic

meanings of those architectural constructs and landscapes in creative ways. By turning modern ruins into aesthetic artifacts, these artists and filmmakers have collectively created a new urban aesthetics, a “ruin aesthetics”, in contemporary art and cinema which critically reflect social transformations of contemporary Chinese society.

In a ruin, the random appearance of certain objects in places where they do not belong creates spatial disorder. Their unexpected presence bring surprises or unease and can stir up different emotions, be it discomfort and disgust, fear and anxiety, or reminiscence for the past, all of which contribute to generating highly romanticised and aestheticised representations of the spaces. Traditional Chinese landscape aesthetics are strongly influenced by Confucian philosophy, which stresses maintaining a harmonious relationship between human beings and the external environment, and is now challenged by the new urban aesthetics. This paper will examine whether these aesthetics, which emphasizes disorder and disintegration, subvert traditional Chinese aesthetics. This in turn calls into question whether representing Chinese social reality with this particular new aesthetics is a way of narrating local stories with a foreign language. The paper will then move on to discuss whether traditional landscape aesthetics is still relevant, and how it could be relevant, in representing contemporary Chinese reality.

Ruins and the Changing Chinese Aesthetics

In recent years, a significant proportion of Chinese art and films have tended to link their design and creation to contemporary living and present day culture. Such tendency and practice have disturbed many traditionalists who still hold to the ideal of ‘art for art’s sake’.⁷

Among the many cultural specific works of art that use Chinese ruins as representations, the Three Gorges Dam Project stands out as a notable theme of artistic creation. Heralded as the world’s largest hydroelectric dam, its construction began in 1993, with completion expected in 2009. To make room for the dam construction, approximately 1.13 million people were forced to abandon their homes and farmlands, making it ‘the largest peace time evacuation in history’. Some thirteen major cities, 140 towns and over 1300 villages, along with about 1600 factories, mines and farms were vacated and vanished beneath the vast reservoir.⁸ Over the decade-and-a-half of construction, artists from within China and abroad, both East and West, came to witness the abandonment of the many cities, and how they were turned into haunted ruins, before their final burial under water.

There have been countless of those, both Chinese and foreign artists, that have used the Three Gorges Dam’s development as their creative theme. One of them, the Canadian photographer Edward Burtynsky, collected numerous visual records of collapsed buildings and construction works

down the course of the river in Fengjie, Wuhan and Wanzhou. Another series of photographs by a Chinese photographer Yang Yi, entitled *Uprooted*, has also represented the vacated buildings and deserted streets in a surrealistic way, where villagers are seen wearing masks and snorkels, living under water.

Apart from photographic art, there are also a number of films set in the region which have documented the transformation of the Three Gorges in different stages of its development. These films range diversely from fictional narrative films, such as Zang Ming's *Raincloud Over Wuhan* (1995) and *Weekend Plot* (2001), and Jia Zhangke's *Still Life* (2006); documentary films such as Jia's *Dong* (2006) and Yung Chang's *Up the Yangtze* (2007); to Patty Chang and David Kelley's experimental short *Flotsam Jetsam* (2007). Amongst these productions, there is no lack of representations of the ruin spaces left behind by construction work. They stand testament to the reality of Chinese societies of the era, making ruins as represented in Chinese art and films socially and culturally specific.

In this view, they differ from the way many western scholars and studies interpret and represent ruin space. Although a large number of photographs of industrial ruins are included in Tim Edensor's book *Industrial Ruins*, he avoids referring to their locations, as he states "the book would be less pertinent if [the photographs] were accompanied by superfluous geographic information".⁹ Geoff Manaugh describes the abandoned buildings as "abstract mounds" which are "not architecture at all", but strange and inexplicable "structural blurs without identifiable purpose or history".¹⁰ When interpreting the representations of modern ruins, many scholars tend to emphasise philosophical and aesthetic issues, yet they neglect or deliberately omit social and cultural contexts. To them, ruins are formerly productive spaces turning useless, losing their original social, cultural and historical significance, to become "kitsch artifacts" that are more valued for their aesthetics and richness in philosophical meanings.

Emory Elliot states that in the field of aesthetics, a persistent problem has been that artists and scholars continue to embrace a traditional notion of a "transcendence of art that tends to ignore and erase history", and "a wide range of discussions of subjects related to aesthetics and culture are being carried on with little reference to multiculturalism."¹¹ Such an approach towards aesthetics is problematic in the sense that cultural values and social difference are ignored, and the "universal" taste and values of a cultural elite group are imposed upon the rest of society.¹²

Over the last few decades, increasingly scholars and artists focus on the ways ethnic and cultural identities affect issues in aesthetics and art criticism. As representations of ruins seen in contemporary Chinese art appear increasingly specific in their social context, this paper argues that ethnic difference and specific social and cultural values are crucial aspects which should not be neglected.

Traditional Chinese Landscape Aesthetics

Chinese and Western systems of visual culture have been separated by major differences arising from their respective views towards beauty and the relationship between human beings and their environment. While landscape painting traditions in both the East and West have continued to influence contemporary cinema and visual arts,¹³ remarkable differences in their ideological foundations have resulted in completely different aesthetics.

This has to do mainly with their respective views on nature and the external world. As Edward Casey puts it: “[T]he difference consists in the fact that for Western painters, [...] nature is *without*: it is something external to conquer, subdue, and shape.”¹⁴ Nature, being the external physical world, becomes subjected to domination by human beings. The “Self/Other” distinction is thus clearly seen in people’s relationship with the environment, be it natural or constructed.

Chinese landscape paintings, however, express a contrasting view that “nature is never strictly outside us – nor, in contrast, within us: ‘nature’ in lowercase, no longer transcendent, wholly other, or altogether wild. [...] Thus there is no imperative to struggle *against* nature, no reason to take it over or take it in.”¹⁵ For centuries, such a philosophical framework was shared by painters and poets, as well as government officials, scholars and the general public in China.

“Scenery Painting” versus “Mountain and Water Painting”

To further identify the distinction between western and Chinese landscape paintings, it should be noted that in Chinese they are referred to as “scenery paintings” (*fengjing hua*) and “mountain and water paintings” (*shanshui hua*) respectively. Scenery, as Casey says, “is the degradation of landscape, its superficialisation”.¹⁶ Shuk Man Law meanwhile points out that Western “scenery painting” places its emphasis in ‘at-the-scene’ feelings, to present to viewers a photo-like impression.¹⁷ Unlike the western tradition of realistic landscape painting, Chinese “mountain and water” painting takes the viewer beyond a painting’s superficial visual expression to meaning and expectation.

The Concept of Yijing

To project interest and appeal, whether it be in paintings, calligraphy, sculpture, architecture or landscape design, Chinese art places a great deal of importance on *yijing*. *Yijing* is often considered definitive in classical Chinese aesthetics. Based on Stephen Owen’s definitions, *Yi* denotes “concept”, “idea”, and “meaning”. It refers to the observer’s understanding of the significance of something, and how he or she interprets sense data,¹⁸ whereas *Jing* refers to a coherent world, often used

interchangeably with another word of the same pronunciation meaning “scene” (as in scenery).¹⁹ In general, *yijing* is about thoughts and feelings that emerge from an artist’s experience of creating a work, or a device to fully express those feelings so as to provoke an emotional response in the viewer. It involves the internalisation of the landscape represented, and reflects spiritual closeness and the fusion of the artist with the external environment. *Yijing* is employed invariably by artists in different forms of art, giving aesthetic expression to man’s unity with nature.

When painting landscapes, Chinese painters do not only use one particular setting at a particular time, but view the landscape from a macroscopic perspective to reflect its eternal beauty, rhythms and the laws of nature. By combining religious doctrines with philosophical thoughts, Chinese landscape painting is not an accurate and detailed record of what is visible, but an expression imbued with the inner feelings of the artist.

Many scholars make the point that Chinese films are closely associated with the mountain and water painting tradition, with its non-narrative spatial and temporal treatment and contemplation of nature.²⁰ Their views are challenged by others who believe that filming techniques, such as distanced framing, long pans and takes, have been used in both the West and the East. Rather than engage in debate over whether these film techniques are necessarily “Chinese” in nature, it is perhaps more sound to claim that these pre-existent film techniques are used to represent traditional aesthetic and philosophical attitudes of the Chinese people towards life, nature and the external world. Taiwanese director Hou Hsiao-hsien once said that in making a film, “what Chinese people are most concerned with is not the form of how a story is told, but the form of how their emotions are expressed and reflected. It is the *yijing* which we are after.”²¹

With rapid urbanisation and modernisation in post-Mao China, however, contemporary Chinese artists began to turn their focus towards modern industrial settings, and express their feelings towards their surrounding environment by representing urban, ruinous landscapes in films and art. In the next section, visual representations of ruins in contemporary Chinese art and films will be discussed to examine how they emphasize detachment and disintegration in landscapes destroyed by humans in pursuit of social and economic progresses.

The Self, The Other and the Changing Aesthetics

In arguing that there are changing aesthetics in Chinese art and films, it must be specified that what has changed is the general relationship between the emotions/messages an artist tries to project/convey in a work of art, and the emotional response a viewer has after experiencing it. In producing a classical landscape painting, there is an impulse for Chinese artists to create a

harmonious and measured composition which invites viewers to have a positive emotional response towards nature and life.

To understand the connection between a work of art and the emotional response given by the viewer, the process of identification must be noted. Freud regards identification as the main process by which psychic structure (id, ego, superego) and concept of identity (self, other) are created.²² In experiencing a work of art, the self's identification with the lost "other" (the external world represented in a work of art) occurs. As Casey explains, "this other, no longer present in one's present perceptual world, is introjected into one's psyche, where it merges with the ego: an identification that allows the other to survive as an integral part of one's own self, as an aspect of one's characterological equipment, as it were."²³ This identification-led psychic integration of self and other, experienced in different works of art, would result in varying emotional responses.

In a classical Chinese landscape painting, the painter "identifies not with a person but with the landscape through which he wanders for years in preparation for painting", watching it until the scenery is internalised and its signification is revealed to him.²⁴ Classical Chinese philosophy emphasises the union of man and heaven in search of harmony in nature. From the West Han period, natural disasters were associated with social or political disorder in the nation. By creating *yijing* in Chinese paintings, artists merge their subjective personal emotions with the objective environment, internalising the physical landscapes, and integrating "self" into the external environment, to achieve a state of "*selflessness*". (*wuwo de jingjie*)

In western landscape aesthetics, however, the elements of an art work that is internalised is significantly different, as artists tend to internalise their personal characteristics instead of external landscape features.²⁵ Instead of aiming to achieve a state of "*selflessness*", western paintings repeatedly remind one of the bodily existence and spiritual experience of one's self.

Although some convergences between Western and Chinese aesthetics traditions can be found, in terms of how they invite viewers' identification with the other (the external landscapes represented) in order to mediate one's relation with the external world, the two traditions begin to diverge in positioning of the self. While Chinese classical painting emphasises integrating the self into the external world, western painting concerns the integration of numerous elements of nature into the self, thus resulting in an expanded, amplified self (and ego). Such positioning of the self is particularly visible in contemporary art and films with a ruinous setting.

While Chinese landscape aesthetics stress man-nature unity and order, and the absence of the self (*wu wo*), western aesthetics stress the opposite. In recent Chinese urban art and films, however,

the aesthetic approximates the western tradition. In Another mountainman's *Great Prospect for a Grand Venture*, for example, by juxtaposing a well-dressed, modern Chinese businessman with aborted building ruins, shows the disharmony experienced in a hostile environment. Unable to internalise the landscape features or to merge the self with the environment, Another mountainman characterises and "personalises" the ruinous space by inserting pieces of household furniture, resulting in a projection of the subject's personal characteristics onto the image, leading to a clear dichotomisation between the self and the other.

In attempts to define a ruin aesthetic that is dominating Chinese art and film scenes through the Freudian concept of the uncanny, this paper suggests that ruins accommodate the familiar and the unfamiliar, the homely (*das heimliche*) and the unhomely (*das unheimliche*), as well as being a space of traumatising, which eventually suggests the disintegration of man and the external environment.

Ruins as the Uncanny Landscapes

In Freud's renowned essay *The Uncanny* (1919), he situates the concept of the uncanny as a "subject of aesthetics".²⁶ Over the years, the concept has become a key reference point in various disciplines. It is discussed not just in terms of aesthetics but also in art, literature and film, architecture and philosophy. The uncanny, in Freud's words, is a concept "not always used in a clearly definable sense, so that it tends to coincide with what excites fear in general."²⁷ In brief, the uncanny can be seen as an experience of disorientation where the world we live in suddenly seems strange, unfamiliar, alienating and even threatening. With the rise of the great cities and the emergence of disturbingly heterogeneous crowds as well as newly scaled spaces, the architectural and spatial uncanny gradually became an indispensable concept, intensified by the shifts in media advancements.²⁸

Although the notion of the uncanny had appeared in western Gothic literature,²⁹ only in recent years have scholars attempted to define the "modern uncanny", or rather the "metropolitan uncanny". Much of what we think of as uncanny in fact entails the emergence of a modern world and alienation. Collins & Jervis state that the uncanny is "a fundamental, constitutive aspect of our experience of the modern."³⁰ Vidler points out that since "the 1870s [...], the metropolitan uncanny was increasingly conflated with metropolitan illness, a pathological condition that potentially afflicted the inhabitants of all great cities... The uncanny here became identified with all the phobias associated with spatial fear".³¹

It is not difficult to see that a majority of contemporary Chinese art and cinema have reflected the extraordinary speed of China's recent development and the ultra-capitalist leanings of societies

in the country. At the same time, these works attempt to represent the “modern uncanny”.

Ruins as the “Unheimlich” Home

The uncanny is often interpreted in ways to reveal how human beings feel fundamentally unsettled with the environment, and “not quite at home in its own home”.³² In *Two Generations* by Anothermountainman, he creates an “unhomely home” – an uncanny urban space. The series’ protagonists are an elderly couple in an aborted building. The setting consists of a few pieces of furniture on a red carpet with the woman resting comfortably on a rocking chair. By her side on a table are a tea pot and other crockery, and pots of *bonsai* plants rest on other furniture. A larger and taller *bonsai* stands freely by itself on the floor some distance from the carpet in the darker foreground. Also in the darker foreground nearest to the viewer is a child’s rocking chair. Standing close to the woman is an old man, her husband, holding a bird cage in his hand and staring at the distant crowded cityscape beyond.

What the picture symbolically presents is the daily routine of a couple in retirement. But as seen through the lens of Anothermountainman’s camera, their ‘home’ is in reality merely an abandoned unit of an aborted building. Notwithstanding the seemingly available life necessities, the home is no longer what it used to be and has suddenly turned into a strange, alienating and threatening place. As visible in the photograph, this ‘not quite a home’ symbolically reflects life under a rapidly changing society in China. The elderly couple’s old home has been demolished, leaving behind fragmented memories of their past life. The change has broken up their family life, as indicated by the distant child’s rocking chair in the dark.

Freud suggests that many people experience the most intense uncanny feeling in encountering death and dead bodies.³³ In Chinese artist Yang Yi’s photography series *Uprooted*, the ruin landscapes take another form of the uncanny by appearing as a submerged city, a dead city buried alive under the Three Gorges Dam. Born in a small town overlooking a tributary of the Yangtze River, Yang Yi’s home town, an old town with over 1800 years of history, was completely submerged during the last phase of the Three Gorges Dam project in 2009. By mastering underwater photography techniques and digital effects, Yang Yi captured his hometown’s haunting existence under the water, with its few remaining inhabitants wearing masks and snorkels, carrying on their daily life like ghosts. Yang states that his works are personal reflections which capture the essence of his disappearing childhood, recording the last bits of his memories.

By re-enacting scenes of daily life under water in the ruins, he makes the familiar unfamiliar, creating an uncanny sense of disorientation. In Royle’s words it presents “a sense of homeliness up-



Yang Yi, *Uprooted No.10*, 2007. Image courtesy of Galerie Paris Beijing.

rooted, the revelation of something unhomey at the heart of hearth and home.”³⁴ Collins and Jervis point out that “the uncanny has become a widely used figure for the simultaneous homelessness of the present, and haunting by the past”.³⁵ Those inhabitants under water, including the artist himself, live in a homeland which has been destroyed, yet they are united in their efforts to reclaim disappearing memories and, in so doing, become trapped in the uncanny ruin, between the home and the un-home, the familiar and the unfamiliar, reality and dream.

Traumatizing the Ruins in Modern China

Dylan Trigg states that the appearance of the ruins “allows us to approach the spatio-temporality of trauma in terms of a logic of hauntings and voids.”³⁶ Ruins have often been viewed as a “space of trauma”, whether they are ancient or created as a result of war. In Rome, the Colosseum was an execution ground that has witnessed countless killings of slaves and prisoners by wild animals. In Hiroshima, the ruin of the Genbake Dome stands still to remind people of the destruction of a city by an atomic bomb during World War II. For these and other reasons, ruins have always been seen as a source of reference and a memory bank for records of traumas.

Unlike the post-war ruins we see in Italian Neorealist films, which are haunted by the traumatic past of wars and massacres, modern Chinese ruins are very often “ghostless”, as many of the buildings do not have a long history, but are new buildings abandoned for commercial reasons. Contemporary Chinese artists and filmmakers, however, often traumatise ruins in order to offer critiques towards the negative impacts of global capitalism in China, and to mourn the disintegration and loss of harmony between man and his environment.

An example can be taken from Jia Zhangke’s *Still Life*. In the film, Jia captures the course of the Three Gorges Dam construction works, showing factories being relocated or closed due to owners’ bankruptcy. These factory ruins, when captured in Jia’s camera, resemble much of the post-war ruins in Rossellini’s *Germania Anno Zero* (1947), one of the representative works of Italian Neorealism.

Through the perspective of a young boy, the Italian film exposes the brutality of World War II. By the use of meaningful long takes panning over collapsed buildings and deserted streets, Rossellini skilfully creates heart rending images of the poverty, hunger and homelessness of millions of people in post-war Germany, and exposes the harm that Fascism caused to an entire generation of Germans. War is long over. But the harm that war has inflicted on people lingers. The success of this film is in its use of genuine ruins. In one scene, the young protagonist sells souvenir recordings of Hitler’s speeches on the black market to earn a living. When the record is played, Hitler’s voice is heard all over the ruins, implying in post-war Berlin how the city is still haunted by the traumatic past.

Interestingly, a similar use of sound and space is seen in *Still Life*, but to a different effect. After a fight, XiaoMa Ge, a young hooligan who imitates Chow Yun Fat’s gangster roles, is killed and his body is hidden under the ruins, only to be found by construction workers when his mobile phone starts ringing. Instead of Hitler’s speeches, XiaoMa Ge’s mobile ring tone is a popular Cantonese song *Shanghai Bund*, the theme song of a Hong Kong TV drama by the same title. Without being haunted by a traumatic past, the construction site is traumatised in the film by the death of XiaoMa Ge. His unexpected death thus turns a neutral space into an uncanny, haunted space. With a Cantonese pop song echoing around the ruins, the film seems to suggest that instead of being haunted by a traumatic past, China is haunted by the present, by cultural influences which are felt in every corner of contemporary China.

Modern ruins are often traumatized when represented in contemporary Chinese art and cinema. They are transformed from neutral spaces to haunting, unaccommodating, uncanny landscapes. As Royle remarks, the uncanny is “a crisis of the natural, touching upon everything that one might have thought was ‘part of nature’: one’s own nature, human nature, the nature of reality and the world”³⁷: such traumatising of modern ruins reveals Chinese artists and filmmakers’

intention to mourn the loss of man-space unity, and to bring to light the negative social and economic consequences caused by modernisation.

The Dual Aesthetics in (Dis)Unity

As seen in contemporary Chinese art and films, modern urban aesthetics is heavily influenced by western aesthetics and suggests alienation, disorder and disintegration. The works no longer represent harmony. Instead, they emphasise the growing hostility between human and the external world, the battle between the self and the other.

That leads one to raise the question: with modern man increasingly alienated from nature and the external environment, have traditional Chinese landscape aesthetics, which reflect Confucian values and attitudes, become irrelevant in contemporary art and cinema in China today?

The “Uncanny Yijing”

It is argued that the two contrasting aesthetic traditions, namely the classical Chinese landscapes and the modern uncanny, both continue to exert influence on contemporary art and films, creating what may be called the “uncanny *yi jing*” in several works of art. Many have used “invisible” or hidden sites of trash, abandoned spaces and building ruins as background landscapes, to portray both harmony and chaos in contemporary Chinese landscapes. At first glance, the uncanny *yijing* suggests the possibility of combining both aesthetics, but ultimately it reaffirms the disunity between man and the environment.

Deeply influenced by Confucian philosophy, Chinese landscape aesthetics are concerned with overall harmony and unity between man and the environment. The uncanny, on the other hand, is “everything that has to do with notions of alienation, revolution and repetition”.³⁸ Notwithstanding the opposing stands and conflicts of the two aesthetic approaches, recent Chinese art works and films have shown that Chinese landscape aesthetics can be merged with the uncanny, and the *yijing* can be experienced even in the most unpleasant ruin spaces. By referring to Jia Zhangke’s *Still Life* and Yao Lu’s photography series of Chinese landscapes, an “uncanny *yijing*” can be found in contemporary art and films, where Chinese traditional aesthetics is re-appropriated in modern works, to express the complex relation between human and the changing environment in China today.

Jia Zhangke’s *Still Life* opens with a long static shot showing the Three Gorges on a misty day, presenting to the viewer a poetic and dream-like image, typical of a traditional Chinese landscape painting. The protagonist Sanming is shown standing alone facing this *yijing*-rich landscape, looking

at the picturesque distant mountains and the mighty Yangtze below, giving us an impression of his desire to be immersed into the timeless environment of the *yijing*, and the sublime land of the past.

The camera pans to the busy river traffic of the Yangtze. A large and deluxe cruise ferry sails past, followed by another not far behind. The heavy and deep sound of a ferry siren is heard as well as the faint but commanding voice of a tour guide, presumably narrating what she could about the gorges dam project and the cities and towns down under. Sanming heaves a sigh that in China today, the search for and the passage to the 'self-less' world of *yijing* is hindered, even prevented, by the forces of global capitalism and market economy and their polluting and down grading of the natural environment.

Sanming is prevented from experiencing his desire in *yijing* not only by the interruption of the ferry, but also by the fact that the natural landscape that he sees is artificial. Beneath the water, hidden from his eyes, are the many towns and cities, and villages and monuments that have become haunted ruins. Buried with them are centuries of memories and history and civilisation. These submerged cities are what Margaret Iversen terms a "blind field" in the scenery, which she defines as "the space implied by the composition, but not shown, which incites an anxious reverie in the spectator."³⁹ The natural landscape of the Three Gorges that Sanming sees before him, that is rich with the 'mountain-and-water' *yijing*, thus becomes an uncanny landscape, haunted by the invisible cities underneath the Yangtze.

In this award winning photography series, Yao Lu uses traditional Chinese aesthetics to create the *yijing* in the seemingly natural landscapes. From afar, the images have high resemblance of the classical landscape paintings of the North Song Dynasty tradition, featuring green mountains and clear waterfalls bearing elements of art and poetry, or misty mountain sceneries, with poetic titles such as *Ancient Spring Time Fey*, *Mount Zhong in the Mist*, and *Autumn Mist in the Mountain with Winding Streams*. Looking closer at the pictures, however, one discovers that the "natural" landscapes in the digitally manipulated photographs are nothing but garbage fields, construction ruins and barren land, covered in green or grey protective nets which the artist assembles, and reworks by computer to create bucolic images of mountain and water landscapes, inspired by traditional landscape aesthetics.⁴⁰ Instead of the intellectuals, monks or fishermen, usually seen in the background of classical landscapes paintings, miniatures of construction workers are found in Yao Lu's works.

Yao's works attempt to represent the China's incessant and never ending urban constructions. Covering rubbish dumps with green and grey dust-cloth nettings is an urban environmental measure used in many towns and cities. As the landscape is persistently seen in an "under construction"



YaoLu, *Mount Zhong in the Mist*, *Chinese Landscapes* series, China, 2006. Image courtesy of the artist.

state, where the coloured dust-cloth is used only temporarily, it implies that unlike the timeless natural spaces represented in mountain and water paintings, the environments constructed and manipulated by Yao Lu are in a transitional state, where the timelessness of *yijing* cannot be felt.

Through the ambiguity between natural and urban, Yao Lu's works contemplate contradictions in visual representations of China. His works embody both the past and the present, the (fabricated) nature and the (ruinous) reality, in order to generate the uncanny *yijing* which reflects upon issues of human–nature disunity, thus exploring ecological problems which endanger the environment.

The examples taken from *Still Life* and Yao Lu's artworks show that *yijing* is still created in contemporary Chinese art and films. By featuring 'harmony in nature' in these works, viewers are presented with 'make believe' natural landscape images which draw on the 'mountain-and-water' *yijing* tradition. Yet on closer examination, we can see that the landscapes in the images are artificial.

The Three Gorges mountain and river scene that momentarily captures the imagination of Sanming is created by obliterating from view the many towns and cities that are now ruins beneath the Yangtze. The protective dust-cloth nets that fabricated the eye-pleasing landscape have underneath them ruins and garbage. The artists have therefore created artificial *yijing* of a union of man and nature, only to promptly announce their artificiality. In so doing, they disorient viewers and create in them a sense of the uncanny.

This leads to an “uncanny *yijing*”, which is a product of the two aesthetics coexisting in the same visual text. This uncanny *yijing* encompasses both traditional and modern; Chinese and Western; harmony and fragmentation; unity and disunity (of man and nature); as well as all the contradictions one finds in the postmodern urban society in China today.

Dual Aesthetics and the Environmental Turn

In a time when modern man is being more and more alienated from his “nature” (which used to be part of our “self”, as implied in traditional Chinese landscape aesthetics), it becomes apparent that merging the two opposing aesthetics – the traditional landscape and the uncanny modern aesthetics – is impossible.

China’s traditional concept of unity between man and nature (*tianren heyi*) and a current global concern with environmental issues appear to be converging, resulting in the recent trend of interpreting Chinese films and art as ecologically-concerned. Sheldon Lu and Jiayan Mi have proposed the concept of “Chinese eco-cinema” as a new critical framework, to investigate a range of environmental-related issues such as the shifting configurations of space, locale, cityscape and natural landscape; as well as bioethics and environmental politics. They remark that “[i]n the coming decades, film will be one of the primary ways in which China adopts and expands ecological consciousness.”⁴¹

One could foresee that an “eco-cinema” and “eco-art” creation could become the next trend in Chinese films and art, which on one hand, requires solid effort to explore issues of contemporary social development and problems of environmental protection and, on the other hand, to re-appropriate and revive the Chinese landscape aesthetics, in order to bring forth the traditional spirit of Chinese art.

In a recent promotional clip and printed advertisements for the China Environmental Protection Foundation (CEPF), we saw a representation of present day China filled with the uncanny *yijing*. A television advertisement entitled *Let Nature Be (huanwo shanshui)*, a series of animated



Yang Yongliang, *Phantom Landscape II No. 1*, 2006. Image courtesy of Galerie Paris Beijing.

artworks by Chinese artist Yang Yongliang, based on the *Phantom Landscape Series*, presented the “mountain-and-water” landscape picture fused with a modern ruinous cityscape.⁴²

Viewing it from a distance, the full picture conveys to the viewer the *yijing* of harmony in the “mountain-and-water” landscape. A closer view of details, however, reveals the “natural landscapes” of mountains and water as images of construction ruins, traffic sites with large cranes, factory buildings and area-wide traffic congestion, giving industrial pollution, excessive urban development and environmental destruction their due criticism.

Underlying these ecodystopian representations, the artwork implies the desire of Chinese people to return to traditional Chinese aesthetics and values, to return to the state of man-environment unity.

Conclusion

In the age of modernisation, commercialisation and Westernisation, the representation of Chinese social realities requires new aesthetic approaches. At a time when man is becoming increasingly alienated from the environment and nature, the divide between the ‘self’ and the ‘other’ also becomes more and more apparent.

Traditional Chinese landscape aesthetics, which emphasizes man-nature unity, is no longer relevant for filmmakers and artists to capture and represent the immense changes that have taken place in China. But at the same time, the modern (western) uncanny aesthetics is inadequate as a means to lend support to the Chinese desire to uphold their traditional (Confucian) values towards life and the world.

By referring to the representations of modern ruins in contemporary Chinese films and photography, this paper argues that the two contrasting aesthetics can coexist, eventually generating an “*uncanny yijing*” and, at the same time, bringing together the two opposing concepts. The uncanny *yijing* amplifies and intensifies the conflict between natural and constructed landscapes, thus enabling us to see more clearly the realities of China’s development and its difference from Chinese tradition.

With growing concerns for ecological and environmental protections, the emergence of a Chinese eco-cinema and eco-art would perhaps bring people closer to nature. When that happens and with renewed unity and harmony, there is the hope that Chinese landscapes will no longer be defined merely by abandoned factories, aborted buildings, and construction ruins.

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