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This essay reflects upon the meaning of modernity and postmodernity in Chinese art from a particular angle. I have chosen *ruin*, and by extension *fragmentation*, as my focus for two reasons: first, it has been frequently noted that fragmentation characterizes both modernist and postmodernist art movements in the West, and a large body of literature has been devoted to this subject. Second, ruin and fragmentation are also important concepts in twentieth-century Chinese art, but their implications, and hence the notion of the modern and the postmodern, must be understood in relation to China's cultural tradition and political experience.

Whether discussing classical ruins or modern photography, western criticism generally links fragmentation to artistic creativity and imagination. This positive attitude grew out of a long tradition in Europe, in which ruins were represented from at least the Middle Ages. Beginning in the sixteenth century, ruins, both actual remains and fabricated ones, were installed in gardens. In the eighteenth century, according to Kurt W. Forster, ruins "became an intriguing category of building in themselves: the more strictly specialized and type-cast architecture became, the more ruins—structures which have outlasted their usefulness—it was bound to produce over time."¹ Sentiment toward ruins penetrated every cultural realm: "They were sung by Gray, described by Gibbon, painted by Wilson, Lambert, Turner, Girtin and scores of others; they adorned the sweeps and the concave slopes of gardens designed by Kent and Brown; they inspired hermits; they fired the zeal of antiquarians; they graced the pages of hundreds of sketchbooks and provided a suitable background to the portraits of many virtuosi."² It was this tradition that led Alois Riegl to write his theoretical meditation on the "modern cult" of ruins at the turn of the century.³ The same tradition also underlies many modernist and postmodernist theories, which, taken as a whole, elucidate a progressive internalization of fragmentation from reality to art itself: the subject of fragmentation has gradually changed from the external world to the language, imagery, and medium of representation.

China's situation was different in two respects. First, in China, ruin sentiment was primarily a premodern phenomenon; in the modern era ruins acquired a dominant negative symbolism. Second, even in traditional China, the aestheticization of ruins took place mainly in poetry; visual images of



Fig. 5
 Untitled (Ruined streets), 1911
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 University of London

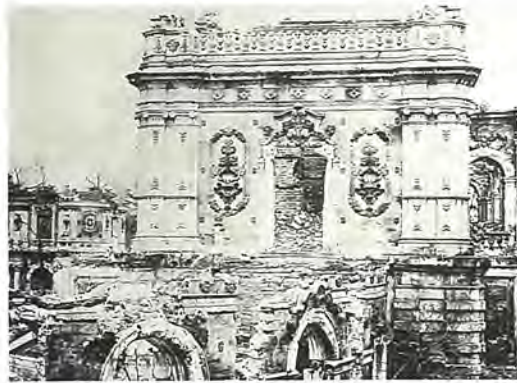


Fig. 6
 Ruins of the Yuanming Yuan, gardens of
 the Manchu royal house outside Beijing,
 which were destroyed in 1860

ruins virtually did not exist. I reached this second conclusion after an exhausting but unproductive search for “ruin pictures” and “ruin architecture.”⁴ Among all the traditional Chinese paintings I have checked, fewer than five depict not just old, but *ruined* buildings. As for actual “ruin architecture,” I have not yet found a single premodern Chinese case in which a building was preserved not for its historical value but for a ruinous appearance that would show, as Riegl has theorized in the West, the “age value” of a manufactured form.⁵ There was indeed a taboo in premodern China against preserving and portraying ruins: although abandoned cities or fallen palaces were lamented in words, their images, if painted, would imply inauspiciousness and danger.

When this Chinese tradition encountered European “ruin” culture, two things happened: on the one hand, this encounter led to the creation of ruin images in Chinese art and architecture; on the other, these images, as modern memory sites, evoked the calamities that had befallen the Chinese nation. The first effort to document architectural ruins was made by European photographers beginning in the mid-nineteenth century. Their works mixed western sentiment for decayed buildings, orientalist fascination with “old China,” and archaeological or ethnographic interests. Although these works can be generally characterized as “orientalistic” or “colonialist,” their impact on China can hardly be exaggerated because they initiated a modern visual culture. What ensued has been a separate history of ruins in China. Ruin images were legitimated; but what made them “modern” (i.e., what distinguished them from classical Chinese ruin poetry) was their emphasis on the present, their fascination with violence and destruction, their embodiment of a critical gaze, and their mass circulation. These features characterize an anonymous photograph that shows a street scene during wartime in the early twentieth century (fig. 5). The subject of the picture is a devastating destruction. First, the ruined buildings are still “raw,” not yet sunk into the depth of historical memory; we may thus call them “ashes” to distinguish them from those aestheticized ruin images in classical poems. Second, the picture poses as a snapshot and hence captures a fragmentary visual experience. As a photographic image, it self-consciously preserves the transience of the present in a stable and reproducible form. Third, although the photographer is unknown, the intrinsic gaze, embodied by the street onlooker in the scene, is Chinese.

The last of these features makes this photograph a metapicture: the ruins are scrutinized and qualified by a Chinese gaze, and this gaze—a historic one, I must emphasize—had already been thoroughly politicized by the time the picture was taken. The same gaze, in fact, created the first and most important modern ruin in China: the remains of the Yuanming Yuan, a group of famous gardens of the Manchu royal house outside Beijing that were destroyed in 1860 by the joint forces of the British and French armies (fig. 6). Only in recent years has this ruin been made into a public park. For most of

the twentieth century, images of the destroyed gardens were known to the public largely through photographs. Articles and poems accompanying these photographs emphasized the gardens' symbolism as a "witness of foreign evils"; their anti-colonialist and nationalist sentiment separated them from traditional ruin poetry. In a more fundamental sense, these expressions signified the emergence of a modern Chinese conception of ruins, that architectural remains surviving from war or other human calamities were "living proof" of the "dark ages" caused by foreign invasion, internal turmoil, political repression, or any destruction of massive, historic proportions. This conception also made the Yuanming Yuan a symbol shared by individuals and the state. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the remains of the gardens were preserved as a "memorial to national shame in the pre-Revolutionary era." But when the unofficial art group the Star emerged after the Cultural Revolution, its members also painted the Yuanming Yuan and held poetry readings among the gardens' dilapidated stones (fig. 7; in this picture, first published in 1982 in France, the people's faces are covered to avoid identification and persecution).

This new conception of ruins explains the wide appeal of fragmented images in contemporary Chinese art after the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, the most recent human calamity (commonly recognized as the most severe political persecution in the country's long history). As in many other regards, the Star's inclination for ruins anticipated a major direction of the '85 Movement (or New Wave), which surfaced in 1984 and soon spread across the entire country. The extraordinary significance and complexity of this "avant-garde" movement still await further discussion. What matters for this essay is that for the first time in Chinese art, ruin images were created with frequency and intensity in various art forms, including painting, photography, installation, and happenings.

Wu Shan Zhuan's 1986 installation in Hangzhou, *Red Humor*, exemplifies one major tendency to evoke situations or experiences typical of the Cultural Revolution (pl. 5). A windowless room covered by layers of torn paper and pieces of writing, this work alludes to Big Character Posters, a major form of political writing during the Cultural Revolution. This connection becomes visible not only in the work's general visual imagery but also in medium (ink and "poster paints" on paper), color scheme (predominately red), production (random participation of the "masses"), and psychological impact (sense of suffocation produced by chaotic signs in a sealed space). But Wu was not simply restaging a vanished historical episode; instead he tried to create a new vocabulary of ruin images—forms that have been removed from the original context and begun to convey new social meaning. As Lü Peng and Yi Dan have observed, the words on the walls are not the revolutionary slogans fashionable during the sixties and seventies, but commercial ads that



Fig. 7
Poetry reading organized by the Star group
in the ruins of the Yuanming Yuan, c. 1981



Fig. 8
Artworks by the Xiamen Dada
group being burned after their
first exhibition, Hangzhou, 1986

began to fill Chinese newspapers from the mid-eighties. In Wu's simulation of Big Character Posters, therefore, ruins as remains of the past have become part of the present.

In this way, Wu Shan Zhuan separated himself from the previous "Scar" or "Wounded" (*Shanghen*) artists, who attacked the Cultural Revolution through their realistic but sentimental historical paintings. While these artists single-mindedly criticized the past and finally merged with official propaganda, Wu found the past *in* the present. In a broad sense, his art represents a radical departure from the traditional conception of ruins. According to Stephen Owen, "the master figure [of classical ruins poetry] is synecdoche: the part that leads to the whole, some enduring fragment from which we try to reconstruct the lost totality."⁶ Wu Shan Zhuan's ruin imagery did not lead to the reconstruction of a "lost totality" in the imagination, but only to further fragmentation of the past as well as the present.

This critical spirit was shared by Huang Yong Ping but manifested itself in a different form. The name of the art group Huang and his colleagues formed in 1986, "Xiamen Dada" or "Dadaists of Xiamen," highlights their strategy of "quoting" (i.e., transplanting) names and formulas in a new context—a dislocation that critiques both the quotation and the situation. The public burning of their works at the end of their first group exhibition may have been inspired by Dadaist nihilism; but the photographic record of the burning (fig. 8)—the only surviving image of the event to reach a larger public—unmistakably recalled the burning of books and artworks during the Cultural Revolution. Huang's *A History of Chinese Painting* and *A Concise History of Modern Painting* *Washed in a Washing Machine for Two Minutes, 1987/1993*, shifted the focus from destruction to a "still life" of ruins: a conglomeration of paper paste—the remains of the two books—piled on a piece of broken glass supported by an old wooden trunk (pl. 16). The washing machine is not shown and the destruction of the books is only implied. Again, this work, when viewed in the post-Cultural Revolution context, delivers two overlapping messages: according to Huang himself, it expresses his negation of any formal knowledge, ancient or modern, eastern or western; but viewers who had gone through the Cultural Revolution still remember clearly how "knowledge" was negated and how similar art books were destined to be destroyed during the political turmoil.⁷

Related to these ruin images was an intense interest among many '85 Movement artists in disembodied *signs*—Chinese characters often, but also including isolated visual elements such as "standardized" colors, imprints, or figures. It is tempting to link this interest to the postmodern discourse on "language games" and the deconstruction of the "grand narrative" of modernity. Indeed some Chinese artists expressed their ideas with terms borrowed from theories of postmodernism introduced to China in the middle and late eighties. It should be emphasized, however, that the Chinese interest in the

fragmentation of language had its indigenous origin in the Cultural Revolution. That decade produced innumerable copies of a few sets of images and texts—mainly Mao’s portraits, his writings, and his sayings—in every written and visual form (fig. 9). The chief technologies of cultural production during that period were *repetition* and *duplication*—two essential methods used to fill up a huge time/space with limited images and words, thereby creating a coercive, homogeneous verbal and visual language in a most static form. The metalanguage of the Cultural Revolution was therefore never a metanarrative. Consequently, the target of “postmodern” deconstruction mobilized by young Chinese artists was not really a Marxist scheme of grand social evolutionism, but the cultural production and visual language of the Cultural Revolution.

In addition to written characters, other material for repetition and duplication during the Cultural Revolution—including Mao’s portraits, typical images in propaganda posters, and the color red—was reduced to isolated and hence illogical fragments. These forms were extracted from the original process of production and reproduction, distorted at wish for any possible formalist or ideological reason, and mixed with signs from heterogeneous sources. Such practices have become so common in Chinese art since the 1980s that they transcend the differences between individual trends (e.g., Political Pop, Cynical Realism, or Critical Symbolism) and actually unite these trends into a single movement. In fact, from a broad historical perspective, we could call mainstream Chinese art from the late seventies to the mid-nineties “Post-Cultural Revolution Art” because the basic means and goals of this art were to recycle, criticize, and transform the visual language of the Cultural Revolution. An important component of this art, fragmentation is “an attitude as well as a technique, a perception as well as a procedure.”⁸ But with the Cultural Revolution gradually receding into the past, images derived from this era were used increasingly less for political criticism and increasingly more for visual, intellectual, or even commercial purposes.

From the middle to the late eighties, images “fragmented” from the Cultural Revolution repertory, such as Wu Shan Zhuan’s red stamps and flags, 1987 (fig. 10), and Wang Guangyi’s *Mao Zedong No. 1*, 1988 (pl. 34), still provided definite references to their prototypes. But gradually such references were complicated or disguised. Works of Political Pop, arguably the predominant trend in the early and mid-nineties, did not simply cite and deface Cultural Revolution images but also distorted them and combined them with signs from heterogeneous sources: commercial trademarks and advertisements (Wang Guangyi, pl. 35), textile patterns (Yu Youhan), sexual symbols (Li Shan, pls. 37, 38), computer images (Feng Mengbo), legendary and folklore figures (Liu Dahong), and family portraits (Liu Wei, pl. 39, and Zhang Xiaogang, pl. 26). Although largely mixing and appropriating existing images, these works should not be simply equated with Jamesonian “pastiche,”⁹ because



Fig. 9
Making images of Mao during
the Cultural Revolution

Fig. 10
WU SHAN ZHUAN
Red Characters, 1987



Fig. 11
XU DAN
New Order, 1994
 Installation in Guangzhou



Fig. 12
ZHAN WANG
Ruin Cleaning Project '94
 Action and installation in Beijing, 1994

in these works the Cultural Revolution images remain central, and because artists were still trying to forge a distinguishable “style” and an artistic individuality.

Political Pop marked the end of Post-Cultural Revolution Art and ushered in a recent change in Chinese art around the mid-nineties: many artists have finally bid farewell to the Cultural Revolution and all its visual and mental baggage. Their works directly respond to China’s current transformation, not to history or memory. It is perhaps still too early to summarize the general tendencies of these works; but some of them reflect a clear attempt to document the ongoing fragmentation of Chinese society. The Guangzhou installation artist Xu Dan, for example, combines disfigured plastic mannequins, war souvenirs, and an enormous image of a smiling policewoman in a work titled *New Order* (fig. 11). Viewers are confused by the random mixture of media, the incoherent size relationship of images, and the casual association between fashion and violence. The illogicality of this installation, according to Hou Hanru, mirrors “the fact that reality is full of conflicts and incidents, while chaos, entropy and permanent precariousness are the real ‘rules.’”¹⁰

An important aspect of China’s transformation in recent years is the rapid growth of the city. At the same time, the city has become increasingly incoherent and incomprehensible; its growth is visible from the forest of cranes and scaffolding, the roaring sound of bulldozers, the dust and mud—signifiers of a never-ending destruction and construction. Old houses are coming down every day to make room for new buildings, often glittering highrises in so-called postmodern styles. To some city residents, demolition means forced relocation; to others it means a deepening alienation of people from the city. The feelings of helplessness and frustration generated in this process are expressed in Zhan Wang’s *Ruin Cleaning Project '94* (fig. 12): he chose a section in a half-demolished building for “restoration.” He first washed it carefully and then painted doors and windows on it. But scarcely had he finished when the building was razed.¹¹

Uncertainty in the external world forces people to turn to a smaller, private space. Indeed “interior furnishing” (*shinei zhuangzhi*) has become one of the most profitable businesses in recent years. New shops selling western-style furniture, modern kitchen and bathroom equipment, and fancy light fixtures are seen everywhere in Chinese cities, and one can find all sorts of “interior decoration” guides in bookstores. The common wisdom of interior decoration, however, still centers on the notion of a *jian* or “piece.” A “big *jian*” means a piece of furniture or equipment that has acquired a conventional social meaning: it not only fulfills the need for convenience or comfort, but also demonstrates the owner’s sophistication, social connections, and financial status. A well-furnished apartment is essentially a collection of such “big *jian*,” which are sought-after goods but often prohibitively expensive

even for a family of middle-level income. The accumulation of these *jian* thus demands long-term planning and hard work. This social practice has created a specific sense of interiority—a private environment in which men and women are linked with (and identified by) their “fragmentary” belongings. This “postmodern” sense of interiority is the subject of a series of oil paintings which Zeng Hao created between 1995 and 1997 (fig. 13). In each painting, isolated pieces of stylish furniture and audio-video equipment, like miniatures made for a dollhouse, are scattered on a flat background. Young urban professionals dressed in neat, western-style clothes are randomly situated amidst these enviable belongings, staring blankly at the empty space before them. In an interview, the artist related these fragmentary images to his experience in Guangzhou: “Every day you see, in home after home, everyone is filling his [or her] home with fancy stuff. It feels weird in such an environment.”¹²

But to Zeng, what is weird—what has become fragmentary in present China—is not only space and objects, but also time and subjectivity. The title of each of his “interior” paintings indicates a moment: *31 December; Thursday Afternoon; Yesterday; Friday 5:00 p.m.; or 17:05, 11 July*. There is no continuity between these moments; and we do not even know which moment is earlier or later because the year is never given. These titles thus function as fragmented signifiers which fail to link experiences into a coherent sequence. As a result, the interior space, with its fragmentary figures and things, is always in a perpetual present. These and similar works are the artists’ direct observations and critiques of new social spaces now emerging in China’s urban centers—spaces of commodity, privacy, and interiority. Related to this new social landscape are changing conceptions of time, place, and human relationships, which are given visual images.



Fig. 13
ZENG HAO
5:00 p.m., 1996
Courtesy of the artist

NOTES

1. Kurt W. Forster, “Monument/Memory and the Mortality of Architecture,” in K. W. Forster, ed., *Monument/Memory* special issue, *Oppositions* 25 (1982): 11.
2. Michel Baridon, “Ruins as a Mental Construct,” *Journal of Garden History* 5, no. 1 (January–March 1985): 84.
3. Alois Riegl, “The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Its Origin” (1903), trans. K. W. Forster and D. Chirardo, in Forster, ed., *Monument/Memory*, pp. 20–51.
4. I did this research for my paper “Ruins in Chinese Art: Site, Trace, Fragment,” delivered at the symposium “Ruins in Chinese Visual Culture,” held at the University of Chicago on May 17, 1997.
5. Riegl, “Modern Cult of Monuments,” pp. 31–34.
6. Stephen Owen, *Remembrances: The Experience of the Past in Classical Chinese Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 2.
7. The meaning of such projects changed when Huang Yong Ping continued them outside China. For example, in 1991, at the Carnegie Library at Pittsburgh, he showed “book

ruins” made from hundreds of old art journals that he had soaked and put through a mincer. Divorced from the Chinese context, this project simply expressed his own negation of “book knowledge.”

8. Craig Owens, “The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism,” in Brian Wallis, ed., *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984): 204.

9. See Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Capital,” *New Left Review* 146 (July/August 1984): 53–92, and esp. 64–65.

10. Hou Hanru, “Towards an Un-Official Art: De-ideologicalization of China’s Contemporary Art in the 1990s,” *Third Text* 34 (Spring 1996): 37–52; p. 50.

11. See *Ibid.*

12. Quoted from Li Xianting, “*Pingmian er shuli di richang jingguan: Zeng Hao zuopin jiqi xiangguan huati* (Flat and detached scenes in ordinary life: Zeng Hao’s work and some related topics),” in *Zeng Hao* (Beijing: Zhongyang meishu xueyuan hualang, 1996), p. 1.