

THE DISTORTING MIRROR



VISUAL MODERNITY IN CHINA

LAIKWAN PANG

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Chapter 6 is a development of “Magic and Modernity in China.” *positions: east asia cultures critique* 12, no. 2 (Fall 2004): 299–327.

INTRODUCTION

LET US LOOK AT an ordinary newspaper advertisement printed in a 1933 edition of *Shenbao* (Shanghai daily), the most popular newspaper in China at that time (fig. Intro.1):

Latest Scientific and Entertainment Discovery
Distorting Mirror with Six Functions
One dollar and twenty cents
It Contains Six Monsters:

1. Chinese Moving Pictures
2. Foreign Films
3. X-ray Slides
4. Microscope
5. Ghost Reflection Mirror
6. Telescope

Spectacular, a Must Buy¹

We in the twenty-first century may be quick to dismiss this advertisement as a ridiculous reflection of the ignorance of the general Chinese readership of the early twentieth century. In fact, early Chinese newspaper advertising was known for its exaggeration,² and let us assume that few readers would be so deceived by this advertisement as to actually order anything from it. But this piece of writing employs a style and rhetoric that was common at that time, and as such I find it a provoking metaphor with which to begin my exploration of how urban Chinese “saw” the new modern culture that evolved between the 1880s and 1930s — a period characterized by drastic ruptures in almost all cultural domains in the country. While modernity provided and fostered a set of cultural conditions in which the Chinese saw things anew, these acts of seeing in turn defined what modernity was. In this “distorting mirror,” in which the lens and the glass reflected and diverted the way the Chinese saw themselves and the outside world, the one who sees and the object that is seen mutually

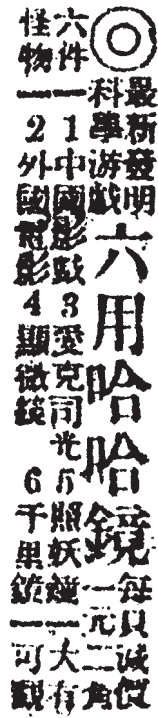


Fig. Intro.1. *Shenbao*
advertising, June 10, 1933.

define each other. But the visual apparatus was not a naïve and direct reflection of the subject's sight; it was an "eye-opening" experience encompassing clarity and confusion, pleasure and discontent, and even deep anxiety. As demonstrated by this advertisement — which claims that the featured magic mirror can penetrate and distort, zoom in or out, and project Chinese, foreign, and supernatural images all at the same time — this new vision was never stable, but rather was rife with contradictions and impossibilities. We cannot call this distorting mirror merely a product of science, since its basis was not purely in objectivity and reason. Instead, it was a collage of amusement, tricks, fantasy, and states of confusion. The apparatus was at the same time Chinese and Western, scientific and superstitious, entertaining and threatening — and could be purchased for one dollar and twenty cents. I would argue that the Chinese experience at the turn of the twentieth century was like looking at this fantastic distorting mirror, through which the viewing subject acquired an alluring yet threatening sense of identity that was not available before.

John Berger reminds us that the woman's mirror so often depicted in Euro-

pean oil paintings has the important function of making “the woman connive in treating herself as, first and foremost, a sight.”³ Berger, and the modern Western painting tradition he criticizes, conceptualizes the mirror as a means by which the woman turns her image into a spectacle to be enjoyed by both others and herself. Its function is to produce an ideal self-image apart from the woman’s social or cultural environment. Chinese cultural critic Dai Jinhua also uses the metaphor of the mirror to describe contemporary China. She argues that in the 1990s the Chinese were suddenly seized by a nostalgic languor, deliberately Orientalizing and mythologizing themselves before the “mesmerizing mirror of the West.”⁴ Dai’s analysis echoes Berger’s in that she demonstrates how one fashions one’s self-image to cater to the desires of others. But she replaces Berger’s male gaze with the Western gaze, suggesting that contemporary Chinese, through the “mesmerizing” mirror, see and present themselves according to Orientalist stereotypes.

Both Berger and Dai describe an internalization process of the seeing subject appropriating the powerful external gaze to look at oneself, therefore consuming, or fetishizing, one’s own images. However, they see the mirror more as a representation of an external coercive force than a material condition that the subject lives productively within. To complicate this model, in this book I want to analyze the complex dynamics between the subject and the object in the seeing process within the urban Chinese cultural context at the turn of the twentieth century. During this period, the main politics of vision concerns not the powerful West seeing the powerless China so much as the Chinese people seeing their new but fragile selves emerge in the face of a drastically new modern commodified environment, newly imported ideologies, and transformed everyday life. The age of self-Orientalization had not reached China in the nineteenth century, and people cared less about meeting the gaze of the West than seeing and coping with the presence of the West. Therefore, this book does not rely on Orientalist discourse, which unfortunately always posits the West as the center. Recent academic discussion of the visual confrontations of different cultures often focuses on how the West visualizes, and therefore appropriates, cultural others. When there is a possibility of the “other” returning the gaze, that returned look is often seen as merely opposing the master gaze of the viewer, as in the ethnic photographic subject looking back at the viewer⁵ or the suffering female protagonist confronting the voyeuristic moviegoer.⁶ In studies of contemporary visual culture, we seldom entertain the idea of the West as a visual object, as if the West must always be the subject of the gaze, like the omnipresent invisible male in patriarchal society. A main focus of this book is to analyze the historical contexts and cultural nuances of situations in

which Chinese urban subjects viewed the West and modernity as objects of inquiry, desire, and consumption. But even if the powerful West is constructed as the object of the gaze, we cannot consider it an inert, naïve, or passive object. Indeed, gazed-upon objects can be very powerful in visual confrontations.

Precisely due to my interests in exploring the complex relationship between the seeing one and the seen, the distorting mirror advertised here becomes a most profound metaphor. It features itself as a mirror, but it does not reflect the looking subject as such. The seen and the seeing are merged, and they mutually implicate each other. This mirror can be compared to Jacques Lacan's extremely influential "mirror stage" theory, in which the mirror reflects the desire of the infantile to hold on to an autonomous and coherent self that experientially is still an impossibility to the infantile. But unlike Berger and Dai, Lacan's mirrored self-image is projected entirely for one's own consumption instead for a hegemonic other — the notion of other is conceptualized as part of the self.⁷ Although both the advertised distorting mirror and Lacan's mirror merge the self with others, in the Chinese mirror one cannot see oneself, while Lacan's reflects nothing but the self. Martin Jay argues that Lacan is ultimately critical of the ocular in that he sees the mirror as producing nothing but a mirage of an illusive unified self that only prevents the subject's recognition of his or her fragmented subjectivity.⁸ For Lacan, it is the coherence of the reflected self-image that makes the mirror illusive. But the images reflected and produced in the Chinese mirror are alienated and bring the viewing subject pleasure by inspiring terror. The subject obtaining pleasure from distortion is in sharp contrast to the Lacanian mirrored subject, who finds bliss through unity.⁹

In fact, the mirror has been an important metaphor, found abundantly in literature, cinema, photography, and many other forms of representation, through which one discusses the construction of identity and subjectivity. Such reflected identities and subjectivities are often heavily connoted with two features: narcissism — that there is a direct relation between self and its mirror image — and illusion — that such direct relation is always impossible. Lacan's theory is based on the assumption that the looking one is unable to detect the illusory nature of the mirror. The "distorting mirror" advertised in the above newspaper, however, highlights (instead of hides) this illusionary property, which is attractive to people. This self-distortion creates excitement. It is miraculous because it defies order and rationality instead of supporting them. The Lacanian mirror reflects the subject's desire for control, yet it does not recognize the subject's desire to be controlled. Also, the Lacanian mirror is radically private. The image it reflects is pure, and therefore is also deceptive. The many media collected in this distorting mirror reminds us that the

Chinese visual culture considered herein was a public phenomenon firmly anchored in specific social conditions.

Combining Lacan's and Shenbao's mirrors, I believe that what the Chinese ultimately wished to see was not simply a new self or a new world, but a new self placed within this new world, which was a public and collective experience. Modernity, therefore, is not a negative external force imposed by the West but a positive structure of power that productively shapes material and epistemological conditions. Let me further illustrate this by comparing the distorting mirror with the kinoscope. In fact, the distorting mirror — called *haha jing* (laughing mirror) in Chinese — advertised in *Shenbao* more closely resembles a kinoscope, called *xiyang jing* (Western mirror) in Chinese. The kinoscope was once a popular form of visual entertainment in China, and it has a strong metaphorical association with Western modernity. The left-wing film *Dushi fengguang* (City scenes, 1935, dir. Yuan Muzhi), for example, began and ended with a group of villagers in an open yard watching a show hosted by an entertainer singing the theme song, and the entertainer was there to promote his kinoscope, whose spectacular images supposedly lure the villagers to the rotten and ridiculous semicolonial Shanghai lives featured in the middle part of the film.¹⁰ However, as the kinoscope features images that are seen privately through a peephole, and the modernity lure is a common one among all the villagers, Yuan Muzhi in *Dushi fengguang* probably had no choice but to introduce a song sung by the entertainer, which everyone hears at the same time, to replace the private vision produced by the apparatus as a threshold between the two worlds.

Going to watch a distorting mirror, in contrast to viewing a kinoscope, is always a public event in China. In Shanghai, the distorting mirror immediately became a major attraction in 1915 when it was first introduced in the new rooftop garden at Xinxin Wutai (Doubly New Theater); people waited in long lines for a quick glimpse of their distorted bodies.¹¹ The distorting mirror continued to be a major component of the entertainment complex until the 1950s.¹² Those Chinese urbanites lining up for the distorting mirror in the new entertainment sites participated in a collective introduction to the modern age. This public dimension of the distorting mirror is absent in the kinoscope.¹³ One cannot see one's own image in the kinoscope, but those looking into distorting mirrors could see their own distorted images as well as those of other people and their surroundings. They were participants of a communal and public ritual, although this ritual is also driven by one's private desire to see oneself.

I believe that the development of an autonomous and rational subject does not describe modernity's full impact. On the one hand, the new subjectivity

formed has a prominent public dimension, and on the other hand the modern subject also desires to surrender to the distorting and sometimes threatening environment. Laura Mulvey's classic readings of contemporary commercial cinema explain only the pleasure produced in seeing;¹⁴ can such scopophilic pleasure be associated or defined by terror? Our understanding of the modern subject is often based on *his* wish and ability to command the outside world in that the subject places and processes the empirical world in terms of order and clarity. But this dichotomization of the outside world and individual subjectivity is too simple a model to permit an understanding of how the subject copes with the changing world, particularly within the imperialist and consumerist environment modern China was forced to confront. In the study of visual culture, I believe it is problematic to assume that we are constantly engaged in battle with our sight. As Ron Burnett demonstrates, we wish to control images, but we also wish to be controlled by them.¹⁵ Similarly, we confront modernity, but modernity also constitutes us. In my view, the modern subject is in large part made up of the experience of being controlled by the external world, in that we give ourselves up to our perception and vision. Therefore, the autonomous and desiring gaze behind, or symbolized by, the mirror demonstrated by Berger and Dai is probably too reductive a model of the modern subject. The modern subject's desire for self-sufficiency cannot be separated from that for self-surrender.

While this mechanism of self-surrender is not properly analyzed, recent scholarship tends to treat modern visual culture as a threatening other, highlighting the dominating control of the visual culture over individual viewers, specifically the accelerating sensory overload that leads to, or is a result of, modern people's fear of boredom.¹⁶ The "spectacle" is considered a result of the anti-intellectual dimension of modern mass entertainment culture. According to Jonathan Crary, the spectacle is not "primarily concerned with looking at images but rather with the construction of conditions that individuate, immobilize, and separate subjects, even within a world in which mobility and circulation are ubiquitous."¹⁷ Don Slater, on the other hand, differentiates the spectacular from the visual thus: "to be spectacular is not only to be visible but also excessive, astounding, larger than life."¹⁸ Combining these two observations, we can see the dialectical structure of modern spectacle, in which its excessive and overwhelming stimuli envelop the viewer in a state of isolation and immobility, providing the viewer a sense both of grandeur and of vulnerability and forming a subject who is simultaneously characterized by a desire for control and a passive acceptance of his or her powerlessness. To borrow Linda Williams' words, our contemporary visual entertainment utilizes "the visual

and visceral experience of narrativized roller coasters” to discipline audiences, providing them with fun but also constantly teaching them how to access and react to that fun by providing various mixtures of vulnerability and pleasure.¹⁹

This negative reading of modern spectacle’s manipulation of the viewer is common among many scholars. A key question I pursue in this book is how this theoretical understanding of the modern spectacle does — or does not — apply in the Chinese context. As I will show in the following chapters, the Chinese people first responded to imported images like lithography, photography, cinema, or spectacular theatrical settings with awe, yet they also had their own ways of coming to terms with the overwhelming effects of these spectacles, such as isolating the visual effects from their everyday reality or playing with the media to the extent they could manipulate these images. Most importantly, the unidirectional influence of the spectacle on the subject limits any understanding of the myriad visual experiences modern Chinese viewers were subjected to. I am interested in studying China’s modernity through the visual instead of through the literary precisely because the meanings generated by the former can be more multiple, elusive, and unexpected than those offered by the latter. While the modern visual culture that developed in urban China around the turn of the twentieth century does have the tendency to homogenize the visual experience, we should not conceive of it only as a single source of stimuli that renders viewers docile subjects. We may observe the complex mechanisms of the modern subjects dealing with the (dis)empowering effects of the new visual culture, and we also detect a collective urge for new sensational experiences of the self through the manipulation of these images. I believe that only through meticulous readings of the new visual culture can we detect the many different responses of subjects to the new visuals that cannot be boiled down to a coherent discourse. To put it another way, the image of the self always imbricates with the context. How we “see” ourselves is highly contingent on and superimposed with the ways we “see” the world. In fact, vision is always the primary means by which we reach and confront others. Through the act of seeing, we build a rigid demarcation between the self and other, or recognize the fluidity of the self-other boundary.²⁰ By working with the metaphor of the “distorting mirror,” I am not taking the naturally reflected isolated self-image for granted. I want to highlight the complex cultural mechanisms that mediate the amalgamation of the self, the mirror, and the world. As in the “distorting mirror” featured in the *Shenbao* advertisement, we do not see any direct self-image through the visual apparatus, but the self is immanent.

Let us examine another example, a comic strip taken from *Xinwen huabao* (Pictorial news), which might more concretely demonstrate the many inter-

sections where the private and the public meet (fig. Intro.2).²¹ I translate the captions as follows:

1. A doctor has invented a lens that can help people to see through human flesh.
2. Regardless of his or her sex and age, everyone carries one.
3. A passerby uses his lens to examine a beggar and discovers that the beggar has more money than he does.
4. A mint owner uses it to prevent workers from stealing coins after work.
5. A man and a woman are about to get married, but the man discovers that she is pregnant, and he calls off the marriage.
6. A tram passenger forgets where he puts his ticket, and an officer helps him locate it.
7. Romance is called off due to the power of the lens. ["Syphilis" is printed on the woman's clothing and "tumors" is printed on the man's.]
8. The thief is caught, and the stolen goods are also found.
9. "Sir, would you please use your lens to help me locate where mine is?"
10. A shopkeeper raises the price of the lens when he discovers that the customer is rich.

Like the distorting mirror advertised in *Shenbao*, this imaginary X-ray lens also has the magical/scientific power to present the world anew. More powerful than the distorting mirror, this visual apparatus can see and locate not only material objects such as coins and tram tickets, but also abstract properties such as disease or even honesty. The considerable power of this penetrating lens makes it a lie detector of sorts, displaying the evil in humanity. This apparatus reveals a unique dimension of Chinese imagination and fear of Western modernity. It conflates material progress and ethical judgments, and it reveals a subtle sense of helplessness in a scientific world where no human interests — or more generally, humanity — are allowed. The penetrating power blossoms into a super surveillance system, along the lines of Foucault's panoptic machine, to provide extremely efficient micropolicing of everyday life.²² According to Foucault, Bentham's Panopticon, a prison designed so that no prisoners can escape the visual scrutiny of the guards, is a wonderful metaphor for modern surveillance society. However, the panoptic machine is at odds with the visual modernity unveiled in this comic strip, not necessarily because it is a Western imagination, but because it is a managerial imagination, designed with the

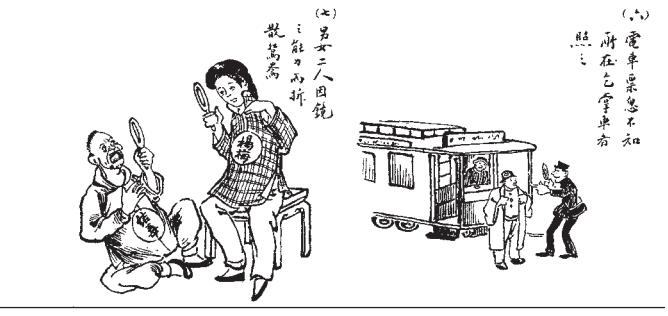
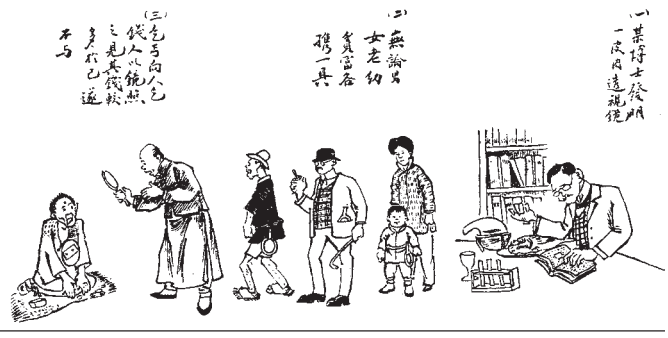


Fig. Intro.2. Xinwen huabao, 1908.

simple goal of efficient control. As shown in this Chinese comic strip, not only is control exercised from the top down, but it traverses a wide range of daily activities and experiences among the folks. If the Panopticon simply prevents people from doing evil deeds, this penetrating lens is more threatening in its ability to see through external behavior and reach people's inner bodies and consciousness. The power of the new vision offered by Western science is as fascinating as it is horrendous, as liberating as it is coercive. Most interestingly, the comic strip reveals the truly "modernist" ability of the apparatus: it can self-reflexively locate itself. Like the meta-pictures examined by W. J. T. Mitchell, this lens reveals and knows itself, and it visualizes its own nature and destiny.²³ The visions glimpsed through this penetrating lens are a spectacle whose power fascinates, overwhelms, and even empowers the seeing subjects. The significance of the metaphor of "seeing" lies precisely here. Not only do modern visions introduce new ways of seeing the self and the outside world, but this modern spectacle also sees itself embracing, fighting, and protecting modern subjects.

The comic strip also reminds us of the many levels of mediation involved in the visual culture at large. There are two levels of vision at work here: the characters watching through the lens, and we — the readers of the comic strip — seeing these characters seeing. If the comic strip is about the power of the lens as a viewing medium, the medium of the comic strip, which incorporates social satire and exaggeration, also mediates our reading; readers would tend to read the story metaphorically. As indirectly suggested by the lens, the seen object and the viewer's subjectivity cannot be dichotomized precisely because of the many levels of mediation and disturbance from technology, politics, economics, and so on.²⁴ If the comic strip seems to highlight the technological/magical ability of the penetrating lens, the way the lens is used and experienced in different situations, by the various characters peering through the lens and the comic strip's many readers, makes visual culture intertwined between the public and the private.

Working around and within the complex discursive network on which the new visual culture is based, I want to highlight the complex visual experiences that form China's urban cultural modernity. Whereas most scholars have focused on political systems, social interactions, or intellectual exchanges to locate the moment of the historical rupture separating tradition from modernity, this book focuses on the details of the daily new visual experiences of Chinese urbanites that, I think, most fascinatingly reveal the multiplicity, fluidity, and internal alterity of Chinese modernity.

Modernity and Visual Modernity

Modernity is a seductive yet slippery concept that can be used to describe and organize a widely divergent set of events and changes happening all over the world at different points in time. Many scholars are interested in the analysis of modernity less for its breadth and multiplicity than for the seemingly identical and unilateral transformations that various cultures have experienced during the last two or three hundred years, which might be partly a result of imperialism and capitalism but might also be largely a scholarly fantasy. Modernity is often described as a universal phenomenon, which, like a plague of locusts, consumes the invaded land and leaves behind only barrenness and nostalgia. It is its ability to link and generalize different phenomena in different cultures that makes the study of modernity such a burgeoning field of interest. Granted, modernity is one of the rare concepts that can connect — often convincingly — different intercultural phenomena, and it accurately describes the transmission and domination of a specific mode of cultural economy and set of values, such as the celebration of consumption as well as the contradictory endorsement of competition and of docility, from the West to the rest. But there is the danger of overgeneralizing complicated and unrelated cultural issues specific to different cultural experiences into the causes or effects of a modernity conspiracy. It is the high theoretical potential and the rich signification of modernity as a concept that both fuels and delimits research in this area.

Rey Chow, in her now seminal studies of contemporary Chinese cinema, reminds us of the universal experience of visual modernity across cultures. She describes the famous execution film that Lu Xun watched, which allegedly turned him from a medical student to a revolutionary, as a transcultural phenomenon, characterizing the shocking impact of media-specific spectacles to many people around the world.²⁵ Chow's analysis is most illuminating to many Chinese studies scholars who, under the influence of the discipline of area studies, tend to highlight the specificity of happenings in China as singular, corresponding to the universal West. However, Chow's corrective analysis should not be stretched to empty out the historical conditions of China's modernity. A major driving force of this book is the exploration of the Chinese modern visual experiences and the subjectivities formed as both culturally specific and transculturally observed.

The importance of the "subject" in the study of modernity has been widely established in Western scholarship, which generally conceives of modernity as a result of Enlightenment's negation of God and the insurgence of a new

humanism or metaphysics.²⁶ Within this new worldview the modern subject affirms *his* own centrality by emphasizing *his* control over the empirical world, giving rise to the reification of rationality, objectivity, and therefore the pursuit of science and order. Modernity, therefore, is conceptualized closely along with the rise of a modern Western subject. However, the modern Western subject applies to the Chinese situation only conditionally. The philosophical structure of seeing-knowing-possession is found in China's visual culture not so much as an ideological given or pursuit but as a foreign model arrived historically, to be admired, copied, and absorbed. But it does not mean we should fetishize the unique experience of the Chinese confrontation with Western modernity, as the overemphasis on China's singularities not only denies the transcultural impact of modernity but also discourages any broader theorization.

I choose to contextualize my study of China's cultural modernity by focusing on the period from the 1880s to the 1930s, when most of the new cultural forms and visual discourses were introduced. I want to avoid conceptualizing Chinese urbanites simply as empty categories to be signified by surrounding social forces of the time.²⁷ Recognizing the powerful discursive effects on individuals of major social forces such as imperialism and capitalism, I also want to highlight the actual feelings and experiences of the people. In order to study the modern subject, we need to explore how that subject interacts with the environment and to recognize how the subject's embodied experiences can and cannot be signified by social discourse. This contextual approach is of particular importance to the non-Western experience, because many Western theorists take the experience of Europe as universal, and thus assume the Western modern subject and its modernity to be universal.

By and large, we might be able to understand the rich variety of subject-environment interactions in two ways: discursive, in which the subject cognitively responds to the environment; and non-discursive, in which the subject experiences the environment in transient and sometimes unconscious ways. To roughly demonstrate the differences between the two, we can resort to Lu Xun's famous "Iron House" analogy, in which Lu Xun is the only one awake in an airtight iron house and is struggling to decide whether he should wake up the sleeping people around him or let them die peacefully.²⁸ Generally speaking, the first (discursive) type of subject-environment interaction corresponds to the struggles of the intellectual Lu Xun between his moral obligation to and his pity for the people, whereas the second type describes the sleeping ones, who are allegorized as the general ignorant Chinese masses. The former approach is most common to sociopolitical and intellectual history, which highlight how communities and individuals act in response to the changing environment

and propel the ongoing development of history. This book, falling under the general rubric of cultural studies, is interested in both approaches. Modernity has been a powerful concept and force in China in terms of the functioning ideologies and everyday experiences that constitute it, and it profoundly influences how one conceptualizes oneself, the world, and history. But people also experience modernity unconsciously, and modernity came to China not only through translations of books or war treaties, but also more silently through the transformation of everyday life. To put it another way, the formation of one's subjectivity is intimately related not only to one's intellect but also to one's senses, so I am as much interested in intellectuals' responses as in experiences of the general masses.

However, this is not an ethnographic study, but a study of representation. Empirical research on a large group of individuals is practically impossible; my focus is on the visual culture that mediates between the social and the personal. The development of modern visual culture cannot be separated from the Western epistemology of objectivity, order, and control — seeing is believing. But another equally influential discourse is consumerism — seeing is possessing.²⁹ The visual is most quickly commercialized to display “fashion” — modernity is, after all, a form of the new. The dynamics between the desire to understand and the desire to possess partly characterizes the discursive and non-discursive ways of the seeing subject relating to the world through the mediation of the visual culture.

While Chinese and Western people definitely manifest similar desires for and anxiety over control and possession, China's new visual politics also contain a dimension of imperialism that is generally absent in the West. China was defeated by Western imperialist powers in the Opium War and was forced to open five port cities — Shanghai, Guangzhou, Fuzhou, Xiamen, and Ningbo — to foreign trade in 1842, and there was a great deal of foreign meddling in Chinese internal affairs after that. Western powers were interested in carving up China for their own purposes, which, paradoxically, converged in their common wishes to keep China together to provide a stable market for their businesses. The introduction of Western modernity through consumption was systematic. Of course, it is highly artificial and overly convenient to consider distinct political events, such as the 1842 Opium War or the 1911 Republican revolution, as discursive and epistemological divides between premodern and modern China. But the year 1842 does mark a pivotal moment in which Western influence began to be clearly felt in this vast country, which hitherto had kept its culture isolated from the West. The treaty ports, particularly Shanghai, which is a focus of my empirical research, cultivated new metropolitan cul-

tures with new settlements, along with the adoption of Western commodities and lifestyles. Cultural activities previously banned, such as prostitution, now flourished in the foreign settlements, and this new prostitute culture, as I will demonstrate in chapters 2 and 3, became a major visual signifier of Chinese modernity. Population structures also underwent rapid changes. While new Chinese immigrant groups tried to promote their own regional cultural practices in the new cosmopolitan cities,³⁰ foreigners also brought their own cultures over to their new dwellings.³¹ The traditional literati culture disintegrated rapidly when the Imperial examination system was discarded, and the rising bourgeoisie anxiously displayed their new power via consumption.³²

As the existing social structure disintegrated and Western imperialism triggered the rapid development of consumer society, visual culture became a sort of battleground for competing social and political forces. As I will show in chapter 3, the West was present in China largely in the form of commerce, and a wide variety of commodities and their composite forms of advertising were displayed in China, exposing the people to brand-new sensations. But the new commodities introduced revealed more than the burgeoning consumer culture. The advertisements set up a complex discursive and non-discursive network connecting these new sensations, particularly in terms of sight, with the hidden impact of science and the military. Some of the most heavily advertised commodities found in current newspapers and magazines include maps, the microscope, the telescope, camera, spectacles, and even medical apparatus. As by-products of Western imperialism, these new visual gadgets were foreign to the traditional Chinese view of humanity's relationship to nature, and both the aggressive advertisements and the new visual sciences thus placed their viewers on the defensive. But the viewers were also made to desire these new sensations and commodities. Here Crary's word choice is illustrative but also limiting. He uses the term "observer" instead of "spectator" to describe the modern viewing subject because he believes that visual culture is not just a set of artifacts but also a complex discourse — an observer observes not only the sight but also the discourse.³³ However, while an observer observes the discourses, there is also an active dimension of seeing and desiring that the passive concept of "observing" does not include.

The new visual culture developed in urban China was both imported and adapted, forced on the people and desired by them. The visual culture this book analyzes was not indigenous to China and cannot be traced back to a historical development such as the Enlightenment, but this does not mean that the Western experience of modernity does not apply to the Chinese scenario. It also would be too facile to assert some "alternative modernities" thesis that

emphasizes cultural differences. Modernity, after all, became a global phenomenon because of the development of Western colonialism and capitalism.³⁴ We cannot take either the universality of Western theories or the uniqueness of the Chinese experience for granted; they mutually reference and validate each other. Since I am interested in the process of infiltration into and transformation of modernity in China, inevitably I focus on everyday life and popular culture to analyze this complex cultural confrontation.

The visual culture studied in this book falls under the general rubric of popular culture rather than high art, not because I want to dichotomize the two interrelated realms of culture but because I also want to emphasize the technical nature of modernity — it was the availability of new reprographic technologies that drastically altered the relationships between the people and the visual culture. More importantly, I do not want to confine the following study only to the investigation of a Chinese agency. It must be noted that the drastic sociocultural changes China experienced in the past two centuries, from the rapid internal breakdown of traditional culture to the swift adoption of new lifestyles, have been studied as either reactions against or results of imperialism, or they are seen as consequences of the introduction of capitalism and various Western conceptual frameworks defining time, space, individuals, and society. These meta-discourses are considered to lie behind the overwhelming sense of desperation and enthusiasm many Chinese experienced during the past two hundred years. These meta-discourses tend to draw attention to the key role of a specific agent, and it is these meta-discourses and those agents whose conscious introduction of or reactions against these discourses combine to define modernity. I am less interested in the contribution of selected artists/authors to China's modernity than the instability and accidental nature of the particular trappings of modernity copied, and inevitably distorted, by China. It is people's practice of everyday life that embodied the specificity and accidentality of modernity in China, and by focusing on elusive popular culture we can avoid the hasty equation of modernity with a direct and innocent copying of or reactions against the West. The realm of the popular was messy and fluid enough to harbor many productive, destructive, or ambiguous transformations taking place on different inter- and intracultural levels.

However, the popular was never a serious concern of Chinese intellectuals of the time. Chinese scholarship at the beginning of the twentieth century, unlike Japanese scholarship of the same period, lacks vigorous discussion about how to live and conceptualize everyday life as the effect of or site of resistance to modernization.³⁵ Although there were some writers and artists in the early twentieth century who began to investigate whether popular culture could be

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