

in all the papers). There is another question, too, and that is: how reluctant have the leaders of New China been to focus on questions of law and coercive power in their critiques of “old society”? Finally, while I can’t be completely sure, none of the contributors to this book appears to be a mainlander, and that leaves us with questions about how the circulation of images of China continue today to be controlled from within and without.

Mark Stevenson
Victoria University, Melbourne

Photography and China, by Claire Roberts. London: Reaktion Books, 2013. 200 pp. £19.95 (paperback).

Claire Roberts brings to this work a sophisticated understanding of both photography beyond China and China beyond photography. The book weaves a history of photography—a technology of the modern age—in China with a history of China’s passage towards modernity. The introduction depicts the subject of the book as how “photography developed in distinctive ways” in China. It is a “story of response and creative adaptation” (p. 7), and Roberts gives primacy to the viewpoints of the Chinese who created and deployed the photographic image in the service of their own aims and ambitions. Although it seems natural to classify such a book as about art, culture and history, it is no less a book about politics, a timely reflection on the political economy of the China-related photographic image.

Chapter 1 begins by juxtaposing the invention of photography in 1839 with the beginning of the First Opium War in the same year. The conclusion of that one-sided conflict in 1842 was marked by the signing of the first of the “Unequal Treaties” between European imperial powers and the Qing government. The technology of photography was used a few years later by the French to record the signing of the treaty through which they extracted yet more concessions from the weakened Qing. The gloomy plate shows an unhappy Qing official staring rigidly at the camera. Like the gun, which effectively put him in that position in the first place, the camera is a technology of modernity and imperialism. The camera “shoots” at him and his countrymen, and is controlled by somebody else, somebody who seeks to force him to do something that he doesn’t want to do.

The exclusive European imperial control of photographic technology did not last long, however. By the 1860s, Chinese-run photographic studios had emerged and were producing their own images, influenced by the conventions of both Western and Chinese portraiture. Through detailed analyses of the background of specific images and their creators and subjects, as well as what happened to them after the moment of composition, Roberts builds up a sense of how Chinese

adapted photography and how the medium changed the Chinese view of themselves, their presence and their past.

The chapters are arranged chronologically, and each chapter both covers a definite time period and is concerned with a distinct sub-theme. Each of the chapters could be read as a discrete essay, and the book could even be opened at random or scanned for an appealing image, then the text read as a sort of extended caption. However, the multiple connections between different parts of the book through images, national history and the lives of individuals mean that one gets the most from reading it from cover to cover. Chapter 2, “The True Record”, documents the last 60 years of Qing rule, putting pastoralist scenes side-by-side with images of death, violence and revolution. Chapter 3, “China Modern”, focuses on the Republican era and the flourishing of visual culture in the intensely political environment of the time. Chapter 4, “War and Propaganda”, covers the 40 years from the Japanese invasion in 1937 up to the death of Mao in 1976. Communist-sympathizing photographers praised the photograph as “a sharp weapon of combat” (p. 97), and later critics imbued the image with the “responsibility to resist forgetting” (p. 92) actual events, such as Japanese atrocities, from a particular viewpoint. This is an especially rich and beautifully-crafted chapter that explores the fine line between the photographic image as a “sharp weapon” and as a blunt object of ideological control. This fine line is not solely dependent on what the image actually “is”, but also, importantly, on how it is received. Roberts’ detailed political, cultural and historical narrative ties all of the images and the different parts of this book together, providing with admirable economy the context necessary to understand something of how these images were produced and viewed, as well as the afterlives which particular images had under changing historical circumstances.

If the “first 30 years” of Communist rule (1949–78) were marked by a near-exclusive state control over the photographic image, Roberts’ exposition of the period since then highlights how individuals used photography “to record their own perspectives and life experience” (p. 121). Chapter 5, “Reportage and New Wave”, concentrates on the time between the Tiananmen demonstrations of 1976 and those of 1989. Whilst the former commemorated the death of Premier Zhou Enlai, presaged the end of the Cultural Revolution, and are remembered as a key moment in the political and economic liberalization of China, the latter are still a taboo subject: an event which, from the state’s point of view, the Chinese people have a responsibility to forget. The title of Chapter 6, “U-Turn”, seems to refer obliquely to the return to political conservatism, as well as describing a shift from seeing photography as a way to document objective reality to seeing it as an art form, a way to express a subjective reality. Chapter 7, “Performing into the Present”, looks at performance art and staged photography from the 1990s to 2010. *Photography and China* ends with a self-portrait that is faceless through overexposure—an image “fragment” that the young Chinese artist says is meant

to “exist outside history” (p. 183). Attention is drawn to the dark “shot” of the reluctant Qing official which opened the book and was, and is ever-increasingly, historicized.

This book is beautifully written in language that is accessible. It is a fantastic model for the combination of image and text in academic publishing, and it could therefore be of value to scholars who use or aspire to use images in their work, as well as to students of Chinese history, politics and art at all levels.

Tom Cliff
The Australian National University

Independent Chinese Documentary: From the Studio to the Street, by Luke Robinson. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. viii + 198 pp. £50.00/US\$115.00 (hardcover).

At the heart of this book is the theme of *xianchang* as contingency, providing the focus for Luke Robinson’s investigation of what characterizes and differentiates the films of independent Chinese documentary directors during the 1990s. So what is *xianchang*? According to Robinson, it is part of the *vérité* aesthetic of a new film practice that emerged in response to the studio productions in the dogmatic-formula mode of the Mao period, and the post-Mao state media system. *Xianchang*, then, challenges studio-based film-making by shifting the emphasis to location-shooting in identifiable, actual places, the here-and-now of filmed subjects, the quality of accidentality, variability and, ultimately, the uncontrollability of what is to be represented. Robinson gradually refines his explication of *xianchang* as he explores various stages and modes of Chinese documentary practice as the production of a differentiated and yet cohesive body of cinema.

Following the Introduction, where Robinson states his main thesis and its proposed elaboration, Chapter 1, “Mapping Independent Chinese Documentary”, grants us an overview of the theorization of the “New Documentary Movement” in both China and the West. This includes generous acknowledgments of the investigative work that has already been done, while at the same justifying why Robinson has opted for the label “independent Chinese documentary” in contrast to the standard account, in which it is known as the “New Documentary Movement”. This serves his aim of teasing out salient differences in the practices of independent documentary directors. Each of the following four chapters addresses a specific manifestation of *xianchang* as representation of the contingencies of the scene, its here-and-now, and the intensely personal, in contrast to the predilection of generalities favored by the state studio system. In arguing for this fundamental difference, Chapter 2, “Metaphor and Event”, discusses the