

EALC 475: TOPICS IN CHINESE PHOTOGRAPHY

FALL 2021 / THURSDAY, 1-3:50 PM / 4 UNITS



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This advanced undergraduate seminar explores key topics in the history, theory, and criticism of photography in China.

The seminar has two primary objectives: First, we will map a broad survey of major developments in the history of photography in China, including photography's arrival in the mid 19th century; photographic modernism in Republican-era Shanghai; official, propagandistic uses of photography during the Mao era; "vernacular" photography during the Cultural Revolution; the emergence of "unofficial" art and documentary photography in the immediate post-Mao period; and the divergent ways that Chinese artists are working with photography today. This survey will highlight how the shifting material conditions of photography in China have been intertwined with dramatic transformations in Chinese society, politics, and visual culture since the mid 19th century.

Second, the seminar concentrates on selected case studies that allow us to question the medium of photography itself. By taking a deeper look at specific photographic practices within their social and institutional contexts in China, we will test the limits of conventional conceptions and theories of photography, which have historically originated in the West. In this sense, the seminar refracts photography theory and criticism through the lens of China, while also considering how different notions of what it means to be "Chinese" have themselves been articulated through photography.

The seminar engages with critical issues and debates across several fields, including art history, cultural studies, anthropology, postcolonial studies, media studies, and contemporary art. We will do close readings of historical, theoretical, and primary source texts, and will develop our ability to describe and analyze photographs through writing. Whenever possible, we will also visit museums and galleries in Los Angeles to view works by Chinese photographers (and non-Chinese photographers making work in and about China).

*All readings for this course will be in English. Knowledge of Chinese is NOT required.

Image credits (l-r):

*Lai Fong, Two blind musicians (singers), with instruments, near Xingcun, 1869-1870

*Sheng Qi, Memories (Me), 2000

*Jiang Pengyi, Sun! Sun! No. 8, 2019

*Beijing Silvermine (Thomas Sauvin Archive), Tian'anmen, Beijing, New Year, February 1976