

EALC 475: TOPICS IN CHINESE PHOTOGRAPHY

SPRING 2025 / TUESDAY + THURSDAY / 12:30-1:50 PM



Instructor: John Alexander, Artist in Residence, EALC /// johnrale@usc.edu

This seminar explores key topics in the history, theory, and criticism of photography in China. Students will have the opportunity to conduct independent research and creative media projects on topics of their own choosing for their major assignments.

Overview:

First, the seminar maps 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 practices of photography in China have been intertwined with dramatic transformations in Chinese society, politics, and visual culture since the mid 19th century.

Second, against the backdrop of this historical overview, the seminar concentrates on selected case studies that allow us to question the medium of photography itself. By taking a deeper look at specific practices of photography within their social and institutional contexts in China, we will explore the boundaries of conventional conceptions and theories of photography. In this way, 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.

*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