

## Magical Metropolis: the Shanghai Surreal (Birmingham, 23–24 Nov 23)

School of Art, Birmingham City University, Nov 23–24, 2023

Deadline: Mar 31, 2023

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### CALL FOR PAPERS

The 16th Annual Conference, the Centre for Chinese Visual Arts, Birmingham City University  
Magical Metropolis: the Shanghai Surreal

For the first time, the CCVA annual conference instrumentalises a specific cityscape to provoke discussions, debates, and new understandings in a transdisciplinary context. This year, we focus on Shanghai, popularly known as modu (magical metropolis) today.

Following the First Opium War (1839-42), Shanghai involuntarily opened to European trade whilst certain areas were forcibly rented by imperial powers under an unjust semi-colonial system of concessions. The city rapidly developed into one of Asia's thriving treaty ports, a cosmopolitan metropolis which became the Chinese art world's nucleus amidst the Republican era (1911-1949). During the 1930s, Surrealism entered Shanghai through returnee study-abroad students who encountered the movement in France and Japan. Disseminated through a nexus of copious periodicals, manhua, exhibitions, artist's studios, and art collectives such as the Storm Society (juelan-she), Surrealism was concentrated in the city's former French and international concessions, purveying a repertoire of distorted nudes, oneiric cityscapes, and political dystopia. The Shanghai Surreal can also be characterised across performing arts, architecture, cinema, animation, urban transformations, and everyday life. Indeed, Parisian Surrealists praised Hollywood films such as *The Shanghai Gesture* (1941) which propagated a distinctly orientalist urban mythology, counter to their Chinese peers.

Under Mao, Shanghai became a surreal palimpsest, architectural vestiges of its capitalist past threatened socialist modernity. Imperial urban spaces were re-appropriated, resembling a Surrealist dreamscape blending past and present. The city became a hub for poster production and other forms of revolutionary propaganda wherein fantastical imagery distorted reality into an unintentional form of the surreal, a reconciliation of 'the real and the imagined' (Breton: 1924). Model Operas (Yangban xi), which commingled communist ideals with traditional theatre, were performed for the very first time in Shanghai at a 1964 festival. Moreover, the Shanghai Animation Studio, founded in 1957, produced *Havoc in Heaven* (1961) which utilised metaphysical elements of Daoist folklore to advocate a Communist message.

After the Reform and Opening Up (1978), the Third (and first international-facing) Shanghai Biennial in 2000 'legitimised' Chinese avant-garde art in a state-owned institution (Wu 2019). The exhi-

bition included the display of Surrealistic artwork. Once again, Shanghai became a global centre for contemporary art, catalysing an art museum boom and international exchange. In this respect, Berghuis (2007) argued that a 'New Shanghai Surreal' can 'overcome the past conditions of socialist-realism as well as the present-day vehement conditions of pure capitalism', invoking Surrealism's dialectical reconciliation of opposing forces (Breton 1929). Most recently, during Spring 2022, the government's 'Zero-Covid Policy' (Qingling zhengce), locked down Shanghai's 25 million inhabitants for two months. This irrational, surreal experience of everyday life prompted direct responses and protests from artists and other creative professionals.

From the Republican era to the present day, The Shanghai Surreal reflects the city's moniker *modu*, a simultaneously magical yet intoxicating city where East vs West, tradition vs modernity and, more recently socialism and capitalism coexist. We welcome art-historical studies of Shanghainese Surrealism alongside broader, multidisciplinary conceptions of Shanghai as a 'Surreal City'. Possible perspectives include but are not limited to:

- Surrealist references or strategies amongst Shanghai related artists/groupings/exhibitions.
- Surreality in Shanghainese periodicals, *manhua* and visual culture.
- Shanghai's urban transformations and architecture.
- The Shanghai Surreal in film, animation, and theatrical forms.
- Surreal visualities and testimonies of Shanghai covid lockdowns.

Please submit one document containing 1) an abstract of up to 300 words; 2) a 100-word biography, contact information and any institutional affiliation by 31st March 2023 to Dr. Lauren Walden (lauren.walden@bcu.ac.uk) and ccva@bcu.ac.uk. Applications from all career stages and postgraduate students are most welcome. Following the conference, selected papers will be invited for publication in the *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* indexed by Scopus. Please kindly note this is an in-person only event.

Reference:

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