BETWEEN POLITICS AND AESTHETICS:

RED CHINA THROUGH THE LENS OF WESTERN LEFTIST FILMMAKERS

by

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RED CHINA THROUGH THE LENS OF WESTERN LEFTIST FILMMAKERS

by

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BETWEEN POLITICS AND AESTHETICS:

RED CHINA THROUGH THE LENS OF WESTERN LEFTIST FILMMAKERS

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This dissertation is a cross-cultural study of Western leftist filmmakers' portrayals of communist China. It focuses on four movies: Chris Marker's *Sunday in Peking* (1956), Jean-Luc Godard's *La Chinoise* (1967), Michelangelo Antonioni's *Chung Kuo* (1972), and Joris Ivens's *How Yukong Moved the Mountains* (1976). I have chosen these works because they reveal an intriguing matrix in which the Western self represents the Chinese other in two ways. On the one hand, China has been a geographical other for the West down through the ages. As a result, the European filmmakers tended to recognize the People's Republic of China (PRC) as the successor of ancient China and project their Marcopoloesque sentiment onto its cultural image. On the other hand, the emergence of Chinese communism set China apart from the West in political ideology, socio-economic operation, and cultural practice, which were diametrically different from those of capitalism. Because of this dual otherness, Red China appeared as a romanticized utopia in the eyes of Marker, Godard, Antonioni, and Ivens. In their search for an alternative to bourgeois society, the PRC served as a desirable other in accordance with the political and cultural (un)conscious of European leftists.

In the dynamic interaction between self and other, Western leftist filmmakers produced a series of visual representations of Chinese communism informed by an intricate relationship between left-wing politics and left-wing aesthetics. On the theoretical level, progressive politics and progressive art share a cultural gene of radical transformation. Driven by a dialectical interplay between self and other, politics and aesthetics, Western leftist filmmakers found in Red China what they had yearned for in replacement of capitalist society. However, the former's ideal of "art for the sake of revolution" fundamentally conflicted with the latter's principle of "art in the service of revolution." It was this inner divergence that planted seeds for the ideological tension between Western leftist aesthetics and Chinese leftist politics. In my dissertation, this tension is embodied in the striking contrast between the critical reception of Antonioni's *Chung Kuo* and the favorable reception of Ivens's *How Yukong Moved the Mountains* in China.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CNDF The Central Newsreel and Documentary Film Studio of China

CPC The Communist Party of China

CPSU The Communist Party of the Soviet Union

ENS *École Normale Supérieure*

GIP The Prisons Information Group

GP Left Proletarian

ISA Ideological State Apparatuses

KPD The Communist Party of Germany

PCF The French Communist Party

PCFML Marxist-Leninist Communist Party of France

PLA The Chinese People's Liberation Army

PRC The People's Republic of China

RAI Radio Television Italiana

RSA Repressive State Apparatuses

SLON Society for Launching New Works

UEC Union of Communist Students

UJC-ML Marxist-Leninist Communist Youth Union

USSR The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

VLR Long Live the Revolution

INTRODUCTION

Since ancient times, China has served as a prominent "other" for the West. Its image oscillated between utopia and dystopia in Western intellectual discourses. In early modern Europe, China was often described as a "Confucian utopia," ruled by sages and philosophical kings in the accounts of Western thinkers like Gottfried Leibniz and Christian Wolff. During the Enlightenment, the Western image of China became ambivalent: Voltaire considered Confucianism to be the "cultural antidote" to the evils of European society at the time, whereas Montesquieu perceived China as a despotic and stagnant land irrelevant to the progress of history.

Since the late eighteenth century, the Western image of China had experienced a notable change from the positive to the negative because of China's increasing inferiority to the West on industrial and social levels. After the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the image of China started to take another intriguing turn: while most Westerners adopted a hostile attitude toward Chinese communism in the atmosphere of the Cold War, a group of Western left-wing intellectuals identified themselves with Red China and romanticized it as a "revolutionary utopia" in contrast to the West. Among them, filmmakers such as Chris Marker, Jean-Luc Godard, Michelangelo Antonioni, and Joris Ivens are notable. They produced a series of movies that display a sympathetic attitude toward Chinese communism. In both documentary and feature films, these works presented an unconventional image of China that runs contrary to the popular idea about the PRC at the time and provides a fertile ground for the exploration of the relationship between left-wing politics and left-wing aesthetics.

Focusing on these China-related movies, this dissertation aims to investigate the cultural identity and political signification of the leftist directors. By analyzing them from a variety of historical, ideological, and artistic perspectives, I seek to elucidate the intricate relationship between left-wing politics and artistic production. In general, these films are characterized by an interplay between realist presentation and imaginative idealization. This interplay has two aspects: on the one hand, the filmmakers made an effort to present the actual conditions of Chinese communism to Western audiences; on the other hand, they projected their leftist ideologies onto their representations of the PRC. Through the Western leftist lens, Red China thus displays a phenomenological reconciliation between the objectivity of Chinese communism and the subjectivity of its European appreciators. In this fusion of horizons, the ethics of self and other dramatically intertwines with the dialectic of left-wing politics and left-wing aesthetics. It is within this complex framework that I will illustrate how Western leftist filmmakers utopianize Red China and exploit its image to confirm their own political identities.

This dissertation focuses on four movies: Marker's *Sunday in Peking* (1956), Godard's *La Chinoise* (1967), Antonioni's *Chung Kuo* (1972), and Ivens's *How Yukong Moved the Mountains* (1976). Although they are well-known works on their own, there has been no comprehensive research on them as a whole. Relevant scholarship can be found only in secondary materials dealing with the significance of these films in relation to their respective auteurs. The lack of sufficient research has left a gap in the study of left-wing ideology's impact on art in a tumultuous period in European history, and my study will make the first attempt to fill this gap.

Among existing scholarship, Catherine Lupton's *Chris Marker: Memories of the Future* conducts a study of *Sunday in Peking* against the background of Marker's artistic career and explicates it along with his other documentaries about Third World revolution.[1] Similarly, the expositions of *La Chinoise* are scattered among various treatises on the authorship of Godard and the development of the French New Wave; instances include Colin MacCabe's *Godard: Images, Sounds, Politics*[2] and Richard Neupert's *A History of the French New Wave Cinema*.[3] Nevertheless, these investigations fail to situate *Sunday in Peking* and *La Chinoise* in the postwar French Counterculture under the influence of transnational Maoism. In this regard, Richard Wolin offers a historical account in his edifying book *The Wind from the East: French Intellectuals, the Cultural Revolution, and the Legacy of the 1960s*.[4] Contextualizing *Sunday in Peking* and *La Chinoise* in the intellectual history of contemporary France, I will draw attention to the imagery of Red China in these two films, with the purpose of unraveling their significations of Marker's and Godard's left-wing ideologies.

Regarding *Chung Kuo*, Umberto Eco and Rey Chow contribute two seminal essays pertaining to the film and its historical consequence. In "De Interpretatione, or the Difficulty of

[1] Catherine Lupton, *Chris Marker: Memories of the Future* (London: Reaktion Books, 2005).

[2] Colin MacCabe, *Godard: Images, Sounds, Politics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980).

[3] Richard Neupert, *A History of the French New Wave Cinema* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2007).

[4] Richard Wolin, *The Wind from the East: French Intellectuals, the Cultural Revolution, and the Legacy of the 1960s* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

Being Marco Polo," Eco examines the Chinese reaction to *Chung Kuo* from the perspective of cross-cultural semiotics.[5] In "China as Documentary," Rey Chow stresses the disparity between "foreign observer" and "native informant" and brings to light the epistemic complexity in the production of *Chung Kuo*.[6] As for Ivens's China-related films, a string of articles has been compiled by Kees Bakker into an anthology entitled *Joris Ivens and the Documentary Context*.[7] Not only does this collection trace the development of Ivens's left-wing cinematography, it also highlights his artistic life associated with Third World countries with an emphasis on China. Based on the existing scholarship, I will further examine *Chung Kuo* and *How Yukong Moved the Mountains* by emphasizing their creators' leftist ideology and its phenomenality embedded in the films. Through the ethical lens of self and other, my goal is to illuminate how Antonioni and Ivens conceive of Red China and visualize its social reality for their own political agendas.

Besides the literature review, I also want to situate my research in the sphere of film studies by clarifying its relevance to three notions: the schism between Apparatus Theory and Materialist Film, Third Cinema, and ethnographic film. To begin with, the year 1969 witnessed a sensational debate between two film magazines in connection with Marxism, *Cahiers du cinéma* and *Cinéthique*. While the former's editorial writers, Jean-Luc Comolli and Paul Narboni, initiated a disenchantment of cinema by denying its avant-garde quality and unveiling its

[5] Umberto Eco, "De Interpretatione, or the Difficulty of Being Marco Polo [On the Occasion of Antonioni's China Film]," trans. Christine Leefeldt, *Film Quarterly* 30, no. 4 (1977).

[6] Rey Chow, "China as Documentary: Some Basic Questions (Inspired by Michelangelo Antonioni and Jia Zhangke)," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 17, no. 16 (2014).

[7] *Joris Ivens and the Documentary Context*, ed. Kees Bakker (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1999).

ideological nature, the latter's commentators like Jean-Paul Fargier and Gérard Leblanc attested to the radical conviction that film may serve as a "weapon of criticism" directed against contemporary capitalism. Historically, it was this bifurcation between the concepts of Apparatus Theory and Materialist Film that constituted the theoretical background of my dissertation topic.

From an Althusserian perspective, Comolli and Narboni conceptualize film as an ideological commodity produced by the system of capitalism. In this stance, they set forth a structuralist framework in which cinematic individuality is precluded by social totality: "cinema is one of the languages through which the world communicates itself to itself. They constitute its ideology for they reproduce the world as it is experienced when filtered through the ideology."[8] In other words, cinema is in itself ideological, given that it inevitably represents the world through the lens of the dominant ideology. Hence, it is futile for progressive directors to treat film as a means of revolution, because "the ideology is talking to itself; it has all the answers ready before it asks the questions."[9] Later on, this conception of cinema as ideological apparatus was further developed by Jean-Louis Baudry, who believes that rather than a representation of reality, what film entails is a "fantasmatization of the subject" by means of cinematographic manipulation.[10] On the philosophical level, both Comolli/Narboni and Baudry lay emphasis on the structuralist dimension of Althusserianism by highlighting the semiotic totality of capitalism. Generally known as Apparatus Theory, this Marxist school of film exposes the ideological

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[8] Jean-Luc Comolli and Paul Narboni, "Cinema/Ideology/Criticism," trans. Susan Bennett, *Screen* 12, no. 1 (1971), 30.

[9] Ibid., 31.

[10] Jean-Louis Baudry, "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus," trans. Alan Williams, *Film Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (1974-1975), 46.

essence of cinema and invalidates leftist intellectuals' conceptual prospect of a cinematic revolution.

In contrast to *Cahiers*'s analytical tendency, Fargier and Leblanc, on the side of *Cinéthique*, uphold the practical agency of cinema and put forward a notion of Materialist Film in support of social revolution. Specifically, Fargier recognizes the political function of cinema in the context of class struggle: "a film can, at a given historical moment, hold back, mask, or reactivate the class struggle, by modifying the subjective factor in the struggle, i.e., the class consciousness of the proletariat, which is at present the principal aspect of the principal contradiction (bourgeoisie/proletariat)."[11] For him, film may exert influence on the proletariat's subjectivity and serve as an aesthetic means of political mobilization. Unlike Comolli/Narboni and Baudry, who read Althusser mainly as a structuralist, Fargier gives prominence to the latter's stress on the superstructure's transformative force and considers cinema an ideological facilitator of social progress. In his own words, "a film is only a weapon in its own area, which is not politics but the particular indirect route (ideology) connecting it to politics."[12] It is based on this operative concept that Fargier criticizes the bourgeois "cinematic idealism" and formulates a Materialist Film that "provides scientific knowledge of the world and the cinema, and is the means whereby the cinema fights its part of the battle against idealism."[13]

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[11] Jean-Paul Fargier, "Parenthesis or Indirect Route: An Attempt at Theoretical Definition of the Relationship between Cinema and Politics," *Screen* 12, no. 2 (1971), 136.

[12] Ibid., 141-42.

[13] Ibid., 143.

Similarly, Leblanc describes bourgeois film as "idealist cinema" and deprecates its ideological nature: "the famous 'window' that the bourgeois cinema is supposed to open on the world is never anything other than a method of permitting the audience to live an imaginary life within a non-existent reality."[14] For him, film under capitalism is a commodity that not only originates from the dominant ideology but also provides the individual with a pseudo-satisfaction compensating alienations. Against this deceptive mechanism, Leblanc envisions a "cinematic materialism" that "take[s] the entirely new step of inviting [the audience] to stand on the same footing as the makers of the film and take[s] a conscious part in the work that produced… the images and sounds."[15] In opposition to the "idealist" movies of the bourgeoisie, what he calls for is a progressive cinema that may transcend the cultural logic of capitalism and enhance the audience's sense of reality on the receptive level.

In line with Fargier, Leblanc pins hopes on film to visualize a social revolution induced by cinematic manifestation. In relation to my thesis, this idea of Materialist Film, contrary to that of Apparatus Theory, constitutes the conceptual basis on which Marker, Godard, Antonioni, and Ivens produced their movies about Chinese communism. Discontented with the bourgeois filmdom in which cinema had been regarded as ideological apparatus, these leftist filmmakers redirected their attention to Red China and aspired to present an alternative actuality to Western audiences. In so doing, their intention is, as imagined by Materialist Film, to challenge the

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[14] Gérard Leblanc, "Direction," trans. Susan Bennett, in *Screen Reader 1: Cinema/Ideology/Politics*, ed. John Ellis (London: The Society for Education in Film and Television, 1977), 15.

[15] Ibid., 16.

viewers' normalized conception of reality and arouse their class consciousness toward a potential revolution.

In the second place, my research aims to establish an intellectual dialogue with Third Cinema, a notable school of film that emerged in the late 1960s. Its connection with my dissertation topic first lies in the fact that two of my protagonists, Marker and Ivens, are considered the precursors of this polemical genre. In contrast to the Hollywood First Cinema and the auteurist Second Cinema, Third Cinema symbolizes Third World filmmakers' decolonial ambition and yearns for a unity of "destruction and construction: destruction of the image that neocolonialism has created of itself and of us, and construction of a throbbing, living reality which recaptures truth in any of its expressions."[16] On the one hand, Third Cinema endeavors to counterbalance the ideology of global capitalism and voice the autonomous aspiration of Third World countries. On the other hand, it takes a proletarian stand and embodies a progressive ideal to reveal the actual conditions of life by cinematic means. As Robert Stam comments, "'Third Cinema' offered a Fanon-inflected version of Brechtian aesthetics, along with a dash of 'national culture.' At the same time, it offered a practical production strategy which turned scarcity… 'into a signifier.'"[17] Indeed, Third Cinema stemmed from the postwar trend toward decolonialization and served as a "weapon of criticism" directed against transnational capitalism. Later on, it went

[16] Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, "Toward a Third Cinema," in *Movies and Methods: An Anthology, Vol. 1,* ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1976), 54.

[17] Robert Stam, "Beyond Third Cinema: The Aesthetics of Hybridity," in *Rethinking Third Cinema*, ed. Anthony R. Guneratne and Wimal Dissanayake (New York: Routledge, 2003), 31.

beyond the geographical level and developed into a political cinematography concerning a variety of issues such as class, gender, race, and sexuality.

In the history of film, Third Cinema, along with my targeted movies, was in line with leftist schools of film such as Soviet montage, Italian neorealism, and the French New Wave. Culminating in the 1970s, they both signified an epistemic deviation from the West and pinned hopes on film for its revolutionary potentiality. In a way, Western leftist filmmakers' portrayals of Chinese communism can be seen as an alternative to Third Cinema, primarily because they share the political tendencies toward anti-Eurocentrism and socialism. However, the former fundamentally differs from the latter in the sense that Marker, Godard, Antonioni, and Ivens represented Red China for the sake of Western audiences, whereas Third Cinema mostly catered to non-Western viewers with the purpose of evoking their national identity and class consciousness. Moreover, the romanticization embedded in the leftist directors' movies about the PRC exceeds the content of Third Cinema and entails an ethical dimension on the cross-cultural level. In view of these, my research may complement the problematics of Third Cinema by bringing a spectatorial ethics into the discussion, so that the dialectic of left-wing politics and left-wing aesthetics can be revisited from a panoramic perspective of World Cinema.

Thirdly, I want to differentiate my targeted documentaries from the genre of ethnographic film. Dating back to Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922),[18] ethnographic film has an intellectual kinship with the discipline of anthropology. Driven by Western filmmakers' curiosity

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[18] As the prime work of early documentary, *Nanook of the North* portrays the primitive lives of an Inuk, Nanook, and his family in the Canadian Arctic. Featuring its docudramatic cinematography, it not only achieved a commercial success at the time but also aroused a far-reaching debate on the legitimacy of documentary reenactment.

about non-Western cultures, Flaherty and his contemporaneous fellows devoted themselves to the representation of the other, and their movies constituted the incipient works of what would later be called documentary film. As for the original intent of *Nanook of the North*, Flaherty explains as follows: "what I want to show is the former majesty and character of these people, while it is still possible – before the white man has destroyed not only their character, but the people as well…. The urge that I had to make *Nanook* came from the way I felt about these people, my admiration for them; I wanted to tell others about them."[19] From this commentary, it is safe to conclude that Flaherty has faith in cultural relativism and holds a sympathetic attitude toward the Noble Savage. In the history of ethnographic film, this anthropological romanticism has served as the keynote of this genre and had a profound influence on its later practitioners such as Jean Rouch and John Marshall.

In terms of the subject, *Sunday in Peking, Chung Kuo,* and *How Yukong Moved the Mountains* are partly consistent with the property of ethnographic film, given that China has long been a cultural other for the West and that Marker, Antonioni, and Ivens indeed applied a quasi-ethnographic method in their portrayals of the PRC. However, this apparent commonality must not becloud the fundamental incongruence between ethnographic film and the leftist directors' China-related documentaries: while the former features a nostalgic empathy for the pristine lives of the Noble Savage, the latter conceives of Chinese communism as a revolutionary other that may supplant capitalism and inaugurate a prospective trend for humanity. As Ivens compares them, "[Flaherty's] philosophy is that humans maintain supreme qualities in the primitive

[19] Erik Barnouw, *Documentary: A History of the Non-fiction Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 45.

conditions of life. As the so-called ‘civilization’ proceeds, these qualities gradually disappear. Whereas I believe in the development of technology and the improvement of living conditions. Belief creates innovations.”[20] In the final analysis, Flaherty’s interest in the Inuit results from their erstwhile innocence, whereas Ivens’s enthusiasm for the PRC has roots in its progressive futurity. It is this opposite expectation of the other that distinguishes my targeted documentaries from the genre of ethnographic film.

This dissertation consists of four chapters. Chapter One conducts a survey of left-wing film in relation to left-wing ideology and offers a conceptual framework for my research. I will first consider the identity of Western leftist filmmakers by teasing out their intellectual inheritance from Romanticism, modernism, and Marxism. In the spirit of Aesthetic Redemption, they draw support from cinema to celebrate their progressiveness and devote themselves to a “cultural war” against capitalism. Then, I will conduct a critique of Walter Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,” with the aim to investigate the mechanism of “filmic revolution” proposed by this treatise. For Benjamin, cinema possesses a transcendental visuality driven by technology and serves as an ocular apparatus begetting a revolutionary perception.[21] The third section is dedicated to the political agency of cinematic realism. By looking at the theories of Georg Lukács and the Italian neorealists, I will clarify the

[20] Joris Ivens and Claire Devarrieux, *Joris Ivens’s Long March: Interviews with a Journalist*, trans. Zhang Yiqun (Beijing: China Film Press, 1980), 46.

[21] Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,” in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Rodney Livingstone, Howard Eiland, and others (Cambridge, MA: Belknap of Harvard University Press, 2008).

concordance between realism and leftism and set the table for further explorations of the revelatory potentiality inherent in realist film. Centering on figures such as Bertolt Brecht, Sergei Eisenstein, and Dziga Vertov, the last section not only investigates the performative devices of alienation effect and montage but also shows how they have served as aesthetic "weapons" for Western left-wing artists. In general, this chapter examines leftist cinema in both philosophical and technical aspects and paves the way for my case studies in the subsequent chapters.

With the title of "Revolutionary Chinoiserie," the second chapter discusses the conception of Red China in the postwar counterculture of France. It starts with a historical inquiry of the romanticized image of China in the West, with emphases on Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Roland Barthes, and their impressions of Chinese communism. Next, I will focus on the cultural politics of the May 1968 events and unveil Maoism's ideological influence on the contemporary French intelligentsia. The last two sections deal with Marker's *Sunday in Peking* and Godard's *La Chinoise*, respectively. These two movies, on the one hand, illustrate how French leftists employ both documentary and narrative films to express their utopian sentiment toward the PRC. On the other hand, they serve as technical demonstrations of how left-wing ideology can be delivered by the cinematic means of representationality and performativity.

Chapter Three is a case study of *Chung Kuo* and its historical reverberations. First, I will conduct a conceptual investigation into Antonioni's "political love" of China through the lens of Michel Foucault and Michael Hardt. Titled "Revealing the 'Human Landscape'" and "Yearning for the Other," the next two sections shed hermeneutic light on the film using the concepts of revelatory realism and the ethics of self and other. Finally, I will probe into the Chinese criticism

of *Chung Kuo* by focusing on three aspects: cultural misunderstanding, the schism between documentary realism and socialist realism, and the ritualized aesthetics of Red China. In general, this chapter aims to reveal the ideological tension between Western leftist aesthetics and Chinese leftist politics. To quote the words of Benjamin, while the former strives for "politicizing art," the latter is committed to the "aestheticizing of politics."[22]

The last chapter is dedicated to Ivens and his lifelong fascination with Red China. The first section delineates Ivens's iconic "solidarity film" and his first two China-related documentaries, *The 400 Million* (1938) and *Letters from China/Before Spring* (1958). With a focus on *How Yukong Moved the Mountains*, the next two sections explore Ivens's cinematic politics through the conceptual lens of intertextuality and feminism. While Section Two, "Between Allegory and Documentary," unfolds *How Yukong Moved the Mountains*'s intertextual connections with the ancient allegory and the Maoist essay, Section Three, "Women Hold up Half of the Sky," shows how Ivens renders Chinese femininity in the service of his own social ideal. Finally, I will look at *A Tale of the Wind* (1988) to illuminate Ivens's nostalgic fantasy about the PRC in the post-Mao era. Throughout this chapter, my interpretation of Ivens's movies will be situated in the context of the twentieth-century Chinese revolution. This case study on Ivens is followed by a conclusion, which will recapitulate the main ideas derived from my film analysis and further examine them from the perspective of the ethics of self and other in relation to the dialectic of left-wing politics and left-wing aesthetics.

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[22] Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," 42.

CHAPTER 1

THE CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS OF LEFT-WING FILM AND LEFT-WING IDEOLOGY[1]

Throughout the twentieth century, the world witnessed a significant left-wing trend on both political and cultural levels. Revolutions led by forces such as the Bolsheviks, the Communist Party of Germany (KPD), and the Communist Party of China (CPC) combined with social movements such as the May 1968 events in France and the 1960s countercultures in the United States and the United Kingdom to constitute a massive socio-political reaction to the dominant system of capitalism. At the same time, many radical artists expressed their progressive ideology in artistic creations and launched a sensational trend in leftist aesthetics. Among them, filmmakers such as Chris Marker, Jean-Luc Godard, Michelangelo Antonioni, and Joris Ivens distinguished themselves for their cinematic presentations of communist China, which I will specifically analyze in the subsequent chapters of the dissertation.

In this chapter, my goal is to investigate the relationship between left-wing politics and left-wing aesthetics from both historical and philosophical perspectives. By examining the aesthetic thought of progressive intellectuals and the political observations of radical artists, I especially want to elucidate how their ideal conceives of art as a possible way to enhance the proletariat's class consciousness and foster a social revolution against capitalism. In particular, I will celebrate the political agency of film by perusing Walter Benjamin's seminal essay, "The

[1] Portions of this chapter are adapted with permission from *Journal of Zhejiang University (Humanities and Social Sciences Online Edition)*. Le Tang and Ming Dong Gu, "Realist Film Theory and European Left-wing Thought," *Journal of Zhejiang University (Humanities and Social Sciences Online Edition)*, 1/26/2018.

Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility." Recognizing cinema as an aesthetic means for a political end, I will further expound on the technical notions such as realism, alienation effect, and montage, in preparation for my case studies in the subsequent chapters. With specific discussions on cinematic trends such as the Soviet montage and Italian neorealism, this chapter aims to situate the issue of Red China through the lens of Western leftist filmmakers in the theoretical context of left-wing film in relation to left-wing ideology.

1.1. Aesthetic Redemption: The Confluence of Romanticism, Modernism, and Marxism

Before considering contemporary issues, I would like to historicize the tension between politics and aesthetics centering on the concept of modernity, in order to contextualize my research in a broader scope of intellectual history. To begin with, Newtonian physics, as a landmark scientific breakthrough in the seventeenth century, historically propelled the rationalistic mastery of the physical world and gave birth to the prevailing opinion that similar revolutions would usher in equivalent changes in other realms such as morals, politics, and aesthetics. This optimism was poetically reflected in Alexander Pope's epitaph for Isaac Newton: "Nature and nature's laws lay hid in night. God said, Let Newton be! and all was light."[2] Inspired by the triumphant advancement of natural sciences, a group of eighteenth-century European scholars launched the Enlightenment, which, from Peter Gay's perspective, "was a volatile mixture of classicism, impiety, and science."[3] Indeed, in opposition to the dominance of religion, the *philosophes* sang high praises of reason and proposed the progressive view that

[2] Alexander Pope, "Epitaph Intended for Sir Isaac Newton," in *The Major Works*, ed. Pat Rogers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 242.

[3] Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation, Vol. I: The Rise of Modern Paganism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977), 8.

human beings were able to calculate and engineer their development by celebrating individual rationality. This ambition was condensed in Immanuel Kant's well-known motto: "*Sapere aude!* Have courage to use your own understanding!"[4] Ultimately, the Enlightenment modeled itself on the scientific understanding of the world and initiated a mainstream modernity later characterized by Max Weber as "rationalization."[5] Based on this principle, human society gradually evolved into its modern form, quintessentially represented by the capitalist mode of production. It was this Enlightenment modernity that constituted the target against which contemporary left-wing intellectuals and artists struggled. Dissatisfied with modern capitalism's core values of universality and totality, they manifested a tendency toward anti-establishment and celebrated alternative values such as diversity and individuality. In this framework, Godard's, Antonioni's, and Ivens's cinematic works can be viewed as visual critiques of modernity in the postwar context. Their radical stance, on the conceptual level, has roots in the three major countercurrents of Enlightenment modernity, that is, Romanticism, modernism, and Marxism. In the following part of this section, I will examine these three schools of thought, in hopes of unraveling the

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[4] Immanuel Kant, "An Answer to the Question: 'What Is Enlightenment?'," in *Kant: Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss, trans. H. B. Nisbet (London: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 54.

[5] Weber characterizes the transformation from traditional society to modern society as a process of rationalization. In this regard, Jürgen Habermas interprets as follows: "the new structures of society were marked by the differentiation of the two functionally intermeshing systems that had taken shape around the organizational cores of the capitalist enterprise and the bureaucratic state apparatus. Weber understood this process as the institutionalization of purposive-rational economic and administrative action. To the degree that everyday life was affected by this cultural and societal rationalization, traditional forms of life – which in the early modern period were differentiated primarily according to one's trade – were dissolved." (*The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1985, 2)

philosophical significance behind the issue of Red China through the lens of Western leftist filmmakers.

As the foremost countercurrent of Enlightenment modernity, Romanticism appeared in the late eighteenth century as a powerful reflux of aesthetics and religion, counterbalancing the *philosophes*' overwhelming embrace of reason. Its divergence from the Enlightenment was essentially reflected in the manifesto formulated by F. W. J. Schelling, Friedrich Hölderlin, and G. W. F. Hegel in their early years: "the highest act of reason, by encompassing all ideas, is an aesthetic act, and truth and goodness are only siblings in beauty. The philosopher must possess as much aesthetic power as the poet."[6] Here, the romantic spirit of artistic supremacy becomes abundantly clear, given that aesthetics is exalted as the ultimate value of the human being. Moreover, the fact that Hegel, renowned for his rationalistic "encyclopedia of the philosophical sciences," was once deeply involved in Romanticism, illustrates especially well the dialectic embedded in the concept of modernity: binaries such as art and science, individuality and totality, as well as diversity and universality are dynamically intertwined in the formation of modern Western culture. As the subsequent parts of this chapter will show, this complexity not only constitutes an alternative dimension of modernity but also lays the foundation for the issue of politics and aesthetics in the context of left-wing culture. In terms of my topic, this significance is particularly distinct given that those left-wing directors were artistically dedicated to a future society teeming with romantic sentiment. To some degree, it is this "artistic

[6] F. W. J. Schelling, Friedrich Hölderlin, and G. W. F. Hegel, "Oldest Programme for a System of German Idealism," in *Classic and Romantic German Aesthetics*, ed. J.M. Bernstein (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 186.

Romanticism for the sake of political Romanticism" that constitutes the key idea of my dissertation.

In the wake of Romanticism, modernism appeared as another countercurrent of Enlightenment modernity in the late nineteenth century. Against the mainstream academism at that time, the Impressionists renounced the universalistic perspective and adapted themselves to a more experiential mode of painting. Specifically, rather than representing an idealized reality based on the principles of geometry, they were dedicated to capturing a moment in time and conveying subjective sensations through visualization. Inspired by this aesthetics of subjectivity, later modernists further deconstructed the classical concept of verisimilitude and celebrated individuality in their artistic creations; representative figures include Vincent van Gogh, Henri Matisse, and Pablo Picasso. For them, formal technique should be deployed in the service of peculiar expression. As Wassily Kandinsky summarizes, "all means are sacred which are called for by the inner need. All means are sinful which obscure that inner need."[7] In this light, the artistic trend of modernism coincides with the philosophical trend of Romanticism in the sense that they both counter the hegemonic value of universality and yearn for the de-essentialized value of individuality. As an upgraded form of visual art, film emerged in the late nineteenth century based on the development of modern technology. By virtue of cinematic techniques, directors are able to express their affect and ideology through their diverse visualizations of the world. Thus, the Western leftist filmmakers whom I will discuss appeared as successors of modernist aesthetics and manifested themselves as contemporary dissenters of Enlightenment

[7] Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, trans. Michael Sadler (Auckland, NZ: The Floating Press, 2008), 78.

modernity. Their movies about communist China, therefore, can be viewed as aesthetic means to political ends in the position of artistic modernism.

Besides Romanticism and modernism, Western Marxism, especially the Frankfurt School's concept of "aesthetic redemption," constitutes the third school of thought through which left-wing cinematography's cultural significance may unfold. Aimed at twentieth-century capitalism's problem of social totality, Frankfurt scholars developed Marxism without emphasizing its principle of class struggle. Specifically, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno formulated a dialectical critique of the Enlightenment. With due acknowledgment of the movement's achievement, they condemned Enlightenment modernity by denouncing it as a totalitarian myth: "the identity of everything with everything is bought at the cost that nothing can at the same time be identical to itself. Enlightenment dissolves away the injustice of the old inequality of unmediated mastery, but at the same time perpetuates it in universal mediation, by relating every existing thing to every other."[8] Here, Horkheimer and Adorno attribute the surge of totality and the atrophy of individuality to the excess, rather than the deficiency, of reason. In other words, the Enlightenment, having once been unprecedentedly emancipatory, has been sadly alienated and reduced to a disciplinary power.[9] To counterbalance the unbridled social totality,

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[8] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 8.

[9] As Isaiah Berlin comments, the Enlightenment models "invariably begin by liberating people from error, from confusion, from some kind of unintelligible world which they seek to explain to themselves by means of a model; but they almost invariably end by enslaving those very same people, by failing to explain the whole of the experience. They begin as liberators and end in some sort of despotism." (*The Roots of Romanticism*, ed. Henry Hardy, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999, 3)

Horkheimer and Adorno invoke the romantic spirit and consider art as a transcendental force to achieve their goal. This standpoint is interpreted by Martin Jay in the following way: "not only was art the expression and reflection of existing social tendencies, but also… genuine art acted as the last preserve of human yearnings for that 'other' society beyond the present one."[10] Based on these ideas, the Frankfurt School combined the leftist utopianism with modern aesthetics and formulated a philosophical agenda known as "aesthetic redemption." At the risk of reduction, I understand this statement as a way to envisage an "artistic revolution," rather than a social revolution in reality, against modern capitalism. Historically, it served as the intellectual foundation for a series of left-wing artistic trends in the post-WWII era.

As the "comrades" of Marxist theorists, leftist filmmakers such as Marker, Godard, Antonioni, and Ivens embodied this tradition of "aesthetic redemption" in their visualizations of Chinese communism. In their eyes, Red China served as a perfect example of the "'other' society beyond the present one," which, for them, was postwar European society. While Marker, Antonioni, and Ivens personally went to China to document its social reality, Godard and other French directors remained at home, depicting an imagined version of Chinese communism. On the whole, they rendered left-wing ideology in their film productions and aspired to an "aesthetic redemption" by synthesizing the spirits of Romanticism, modernism, and Marxism. In the next section, I will illuminate the radical potentiality of film by examining Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility." To facilitate the case studies on those directors' films about communist China, I will reveal how cinema may theoretically foster the

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[10] Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), 178-79.

proletariat's class consciousness and ultimately serve as an aesthetic means to a political end for Western leftist filmmakers.

1.2. Envisioning Progress: The Benjaminian Potentiality of Film

As the most influential visual art of the twentieth century, film took advantage of technological development to achieve greater verisimilitude than painting and photography. Historically, this merit not only had substantial commercial value but also brought the social function of cinema under scholarly consideration. Among the critics, Walter Benjamin distinguished himself for his farsighted commentary on the political agency of film. From a Marxist point of view, he showed a dialectical attitude toward motion picture's social function in the context of 1930s Europe.

In "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," Benjamin first mourns art's loss of "aura" – authenticity or uniqueness – in modern times while celebrating the artwork's technological reproducibility. For him, "as soon as the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applied to artistic production, the whole social function of art is revolutionized. Instead of being founded on ritual, it is based on a different practice: politics."[11] This bourgeoning politicization of art is especially germane to cinema because of its extraordinary popularity. In the context of German films made during the Weimar Republic and early Third Reich, Benjamin further ruminates on the social significance of film and formulates a dialectical reflection. On the one hand, he echoes Horkheimer and Adorno's theory of Cultural Industry[12] in finding that

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[11] Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," 24-25.

[12] It is worth mentioning that Horkheimer and Adorno's program of "aesthetic redemption," in its original sense, relies on traditional art such as painting and music and

indoctrination takes place in cinematic screening: "nowhere more than in the cinema are the reactions of individuals, which together make up the massive reaction of the audience, determined by the imminent concentration of reactions into a mass."[13] In other words, Benjamin deems the movie theater a venue where individuals are subjected to political propaganda. Historically, this supposition was partly owing to his negative reaction to Soviet partisan films in the 1920s.

On the other hand, Benjamin pins political hopes on film for its potential emancipatory force. Disagreeing with Horkheimer and Adorno on this matter, he recognizes cinema as a powerful means for "aesthetic redemption": "the function of film is to train human beings in the apperceptions and reactions needed to deal with a vast apparatus whose role in their lives is expanding almost daily. Dealing with this apparatus also teaches them that technology will release them from their enslavement to the powers of the apparatus only when humanity's whole constitution has adapted itself to the new productive forces which the second technology has set free."[14] Here, we can discern a quintessential Marxist logic, that is, the advancement of productivity engenders a superstructure that allows human beings to adapt themselves to the social condition resulting from modern technology. More specifically, Benjamin holds that film may serve as a "training program" that counteracts the booming totality of capitalism through cinematography: "with the close-up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended.

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excludes new media art represented by film. For them, film exemplifies a specific form of Cultural Industry and functions to consolidate the existing order of bourgeois society.

[13] Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," 36.

[14] Ibid., 26-27.

And just as enlargement not merely clarifies what we see indistinctly 'in any case,' but brings to light entirely new structures of matter, slow motion not only reveals familiar aspects of movements, but discloses quite unknown aspects within them."[15] Thus, film is believed to possess a transcendental visuality derived from modern technology. Regarding the mechanism of this transcendence, Esther Leslie comments as follows: "through estrangement, film simultaneously presents and counters the illusion of the real, thereby extending 'our comprehension' of the actual scientific and social 'necessities that rule our lives.'"[16] In other words, film technologically entails the antinomy of physical world and cinematic world. By being exposed to this antinomy, the spectators are invited to critically examine their everyday lives and thus achieve a more dynamic state of mind.[17]

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[15] Ibid., 37.

[16] Esther Leslie, "Interrupted Dialogues of Realism and Modernism: The Fact of New Forms of Life, Already Born and Active," in *Adventures in Realism*, ed. Matthew Beaumont (Malden: Blackwell, 2007), 128.

[17] Pertaining to the transcendental visuality of film, critics such as Siegfried Kracauer and Béla Balázs share similar observations with Benjamin. As Kracauer sees it, "film is essentially an extension of photography and therefore shares with this medium a marked affinity for the visible world around us. Films come into their own when they record and reveal physical reality. Now this reality includes many phenomena which would hardly be perceived were it not for the motion picture camera's ability to catch them on the wing… Films are true to the medium to the extent that they penetrate the world before our eyes." (*Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1960, ix) For Balázs, "the camera has uncovered that cell-life of the vital issues in which all great events are ultimately conceived; for the greatest land slide is only the aggregate of the movements of single particles. A multitude of close-ups can show us the very instant in which the general is transformed into the particular. The close-up has not only widened our vision of life, it has also deepened it." (*Theory of the Film: Character and Growth of a New Art*, trans. Edith Bone, New York: Dover Publications, 1970, 55)

Furthermore, Benjamin pins hopes on film editing as a means to inspire a progressive perception:

> In the film studio the apparatus has penetrated so deeply into reality that a pure view of that reality, free of the foreign body of equipment, is the result of a special procedure – namely, the shooting by the specially adjusted photographic device and the assembly of that shot with others of the same kind. The equipment-free aspect of reality has here become the height of artifice, and the vision of immediate reality the Blue Flower in the land of technology.[18]

Apparently, Benjamin has a utopian expectation of cinematic techniques represented by montage and long take.[19] In particular, he anticipates them transcending the level of visual reproduction to unleash a revelatory force that would enable the audience to grasp a deeper sense of reality. It is this potentiality that engenders what he calls "revolutionary opportunity" by which a more progressive class consciousness can be actualized. In recognition of this potentiality, Benjamin further calls upon the proletariat to wrest the social function of film from the bourgeoisie: "a compelling urge toward new social opportunities is being clandestinely exploited in the interests of a property-owning minority. For this reason alone, the expropriation of film capital is an urgent demand for the proletariat."[20] In a zealous tone, he censures the capitalist Cultural Industry and envisions a new cinema that may contribute to the working class's political dynamism and solidarity. In the tradition of left-wing film, these Benjaminian ideals were put into practice based on the dual concepts of representability and performativity, exemplified by

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[18] Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," 35.

[19] This utopianism is particularly reflected in his reference to the Blue Flower. Derived from Novalis's *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, this image symbolizes the ultimate hope and supreme beauty of things.

[20] Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," 34.

the schools of Italian neorealism and Soviet montage, respectively. In the following sections, I will unravel these two notions by focusing on the dialectic of politics and aesthetics and further elucidate how they plant seeds for Western leftist filmmakers' visual representations of Red China on the theoretical level.

1.3. Beyond Representation: Cinematic Realism and Its Political Agency

Among the cases to be discussed, Chris Marker's *Sunday in Peking* (1956), Michelangelo Antonioni's *Chung Kuo* (1972), and Joris Ivens's *How Yukong Moved the Mountains* (1976) belong to the genre of documentary film. As Bill Nichols points out, "neither a fictional invention nor a factual reproduction, documentary draws on and refers to historical reality while representing it from a distinct perspective."[21] This statement not only differentiates documentary from fiction film but also proclaims the aesthetic root of this genre, that is, realism. In this section, I will unpack the concept of realism, centering on its political agency behind the technique of representation. By further discussing Lukács's theory on realism and the cinematography of Italian neorealism, my goal is to correlate left-wing aesthetics with left-wing ideology and lay conceptual foundations for my later critiques of Marker's, Antonioni's, and Ivens's documentary films about communist China.

Dating back to ancient Greece, realism is one of the most important principles in Western literary and art criticism. According to Matthew Beaumont, "realism in this inclusive sense can briefly be sketched as the assumption that it is possible, through the act of representation, in one semiotic code or another, to provide cognitive as well as imaginative access to a material,

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[21] Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 6-7.

historical reality that, though irreducibly mediated by human consciousness, and of course by language, is nonetheless independent of it."[22] Here, the word "access" deserves our special attention, for it suggests that, after all, "realist" representation is inseparable from the creator's intentional construction and thus manifests itself as a hybrid presence of subjectivity and objectivity. Based on this conceptual framework, Beaumont further indicates the temporality embedded in this concept: "[realism] necessarily shapes the relationship of intellectuals both to the historical past and to the future into which, potentially at least, the past opens up; and it consequently determines whether intellectuals feel that it is their task, as Karl Marx famously put it, to interpret the world or to change it too."[23] For him, realist perception is able to situate intellectuals in the confluence of the past and the future. It is this immersion of temporality that activates their progressive consciousness and practical initiative. As I see it, Marker, Antonioni, and Ivens appear as "intellectuals" of this kind. Dissatisfied with Western capitalism, they were attracted by the total revolution led by the CPC. Driven by this fascination, they visited China in person and documented its social reality through their filmic lens. These visualizations represent the directors' spiritual quest of a more "progressive reality," but they also possess unique political agency that serves to elevate class consciousness in Benjamin's terms. In sum, the temporality incarnated in realism constitutes an aesthetic core of the leftist documentaries about Red China. To some degree, these films beget a "visual revolution" for both the director and the audience. The world of Chinese communism, in these cases, is not so much a real space to be

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[22] Matthew Beaumont, introduction to *Adventures in Realism*, ed. Matthew Beaumont (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 2.

[23] Ibid., 3

explored as a virtual space to be idealized. In the following chapters, I will substantiate my view with copious scene analyses and further probe into the dialectic of politics and aesthetics in the context of left-wing culture.

Figure 1.1. “The Gleaners.” Jean-François Millet. Oil on Canvas. 1857. (left)
Figure 1.2. “The Stone Breakers.” Gustave Courbet. Oil on Canvas. 1850. (right)

Besides the temporal dimension, realism’s political significance also lies in its representational focus. In *Mimesis*, Erich Auerbach defines literary realism as “the serious treatment of everyday reality, the rise of more extensive and socially inferior human groups to the position of subject matter for problematic-existential representation, on the one hand; on the other, the embedding of random persons and events in the general course of contemporary history, the fluid historical background.”[24] According to him, realism is a powerful mode for reflecting the living conditions of the working class. This tendency is also prominent in nineteenth-century realist painting, represented by such works as Jean-François Millet’s “The Gleaners” (Figure 1.1) and Gustave Courbet’s “The Stone Breakers” (Figure 1.2). As Rachel Bowlby sees it, this concentration on the working class denotes realism’s “democratic tendency”:

[24] Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 491.

"realism was in the spirit of the democratizing movements of the nineteenth century, bringing into literary or painterly view common worlds of experience that had previously been aesthetically unseen, disregarded, or out of bounds."[25] Indeed, realism shares a left-wing tendency with Marxism in the sense that they both attach moral importance to the working class and envision a social transformation in favor of the proletariat. To some degree, it embodies a progressive tendency in line with the leftist ideal of changing the world. From this perspective, the fact that left-wing directors such as Marker, Antonioni, and Ivens deployed the genre of documentary to represent communist China is highly appropriate on both artistic and moral levels. Their works, with ample celebrations of the Chinese working class, illustrate how artistic form may intrinsically facilitate the expression of political ideology.

Finally, realism specializes in locating particular entities in the course of history and artistically manifests the dialectic of individuality and totality. Based on its natural affinity with leftist culture, realism excels in revealing implicit significance through explicit representation. Regarding this cognitive progressiveness, Lukács offers the following commentary:

> Great realism, therefore, does not portray an immediately obvious aspect of reality but one which is permanent and objectively more significant, namely man in the whole range of his relations to the real world, above all those which outlast mere fashion. Over and above that, it captures tendencies of development that only exist incipiently and so have not yet had the opportunity to unfold their entire human and social potential. To discern and give shape to such underground trends is the great historical mission of the true literary avant-garde.[26]

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[25] Rachel Bowlby, foreword to *Adventures in Realism*, ed. Matthew Beaumont (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), xiii.

[26] Georg Lukács, "Realism in the Balance," in *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: NLB, 1977), 48.

For him, realism has a transcendental representability which enables the reader to foresee the trajectory of historical development. As Leslie comments, "for Lukács, realism is the sole literary mode capable of representing the true image of society, because it strives to represent it in its totality and demonstrates the importance of conscious human rationality in determining history."[27] In other words, realism has a representational prowess which can penetrate the "fashion" of life and grasp totality in both temporal and spatial dimensions. By virtue of realist representation, the artist may not only anatomize the present reality but also shed light on the probable trajectory of history. Fundamentally, this revelatory force constitutes an artistic instrumentality by which leftist artists, including the directors that I will focus on, strive for their political aspirations.

Based on this potential force of revelation, Lukács further echoes Benjamin by proposing a "perceptive training" through art: "through the mediation of realist literature, the soul of the masses is made receptive for an understanding of the great, progressive and democratic epochs of human history. This will prepare it for the new type of revolutionary democracy that is represented by the Popular Front."[28] In other words, Lukács thinks the revelatory force of realism will engender an apocalyptical understanding among the masses and thus deems realism an aesthetic means for a political end. From this perspective, cinema is not so much a place of recreation as a site of mobilization, where realist representations on the screen may edify the audience with a progressive view of the world. In the history of film, this Lukácsian potentiality

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[27] Leslie, "Interrupted Dialogues of Realism and Modernism: The Fact of New Forms of Life, Already Born and Active," 126.

[28] Lukács, "Realism in the Balance," 56-57.

of realism is epitomized by the school of Italian neorealism, whose members include Michelangelo Antonioni in his early artistic career.

Culminating in the late 1940s, Italian neorealism "set out to establish as complete a congruence as possible between its representation of reality and the lived experience of postwar Italian reality."[29] Despite their internal inconsistency, neorealists generally hold that film should undertake an ethical responsibility to enlighten the audience about social reality, with a particular concentration on the lives of the least well-off. Therefore, Italian neorealism shows a distinct tendency toward left-wing politics, exemplified by Roberto Rossellini's *Rome, Open City* (1945) and Luchino Visconti's *The Earth Trembles* (1948).[30] On the technical level, the neorealist ideal is implemented by deploying real locations and non-professional actors. Regarding these strategies, Peter Bondanella comments as follows: "the neorealists in principle 'respected' the ontological wholeness of reality they filmed, just as the rhythm of their narrated screen time often 'respected' the actual duration of time within the story."[31] Indeed, neorealist cinema features a representational authenticity and resembles documentary in terms of both cinematography and morality. As Benjamin and Lukács once envisaged, what neorealists yearned for is to present a genuine sense of reality to the audience, in hopes of enhancing the proletariat's

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[29] Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 168.

[30] Despite their diverse plots, both movies highlight the heroic deeds of the proletariat and the revolutionary spirit of class struggle.

[31] Peter Bondanella, *Italian Cinema: From Neorealism to the Present* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 32.

class consciousness. Regarding the mechanism in this process, Cesare Zavattini offers an in-depth analysis in his seminal essay "Some Ideas on the Cinema."

As the playwright of *Bicycle Thieves* (1948) and *Umberto D.* (1952), Zavattini is considered the foremost theorist of Italian neorealism. In the first place, he establishes a connection between realism's epistemic and ethical dimensions: "it requires, too, a true and real interest in what is happening, a search for the most deeply hidden human values, which is why we feel that the cinema must recruit not only intelligent people, but, above all, 'living' souls, the morally richest people."[32] For him, the revelatory force of realism not only enables a penetrative cognition but also calls for a progressive morality, corresponding to the intensive comprehension of social reality. On this basis, Zavattini further articulates how film may contribute to this transcendence: "people understand themselves better than the social fabric; and to see themselves on the screen, performing their daily actions – remembering that to see oneself gives one the sense of being unlike oneself – like hearing one's own voice on the radio – can help them to fill up a void, a lack of knowledge of reality."[33] In other words, the verisimilitude of representation is expected to engender a reflective moment that invites the audience to reassess his or her social identity in the milieu. It is in this sense that cinematic realism potentially serves as a means to awakening people's class consciousness and enhancing the working class's solidarity.

Relevant to my research, this principle of leftist realism had a great influence on Antonioni, who was himself a follower of Italian neorealism. His documentary *Chung Kuo*

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[32] Cesare Zavattini, "Some Ideas on the Cinema," in *Vittorio de Sica: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Stephen Snyder and Howard Curle (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 51.

[33] Ibid., 55.

(1972), along with his comrade Ivens's *How Yukong Moved the Mountains* (1976), is highly notable for their classic exploitations of realism's political agency in visualizing communist China. In Chapter Three and Chapter Four, I will concentrate on these two films respectively. With a method combining film analysis, critical inquiry, and historical studies, my goal is to discuss the politicization of realism in detail and further manifest the "aesthetic redemption" behind their documentary screens.

1.4. Revolutionary Performativity: The Political Significance of Alienation Effect and Montage

Among the filmmakers to be discussed, Jean-Luc Godard manifests a notable deviation from realist representation in his fiction film about Red China, *La Chinoise* (1967). On the formal level, this artistic strategy appears as a cinematic adaptation of the German playwright Bertolt Brecht's theatrical concept of *Verfremdungseffekt*, which can be translated into "the alienation effect."[34] In addition, the cinematic technique of montage serves as another performative device that Godard and other directors amply deploy in their portraits of Chinese communism. Given that both alienation effect and montage have a Marxist background, it can be said that they share a revolutionary performativity and possess inherent consistency that contributes to Western leftist filmmakers' manifestations of Red China. In this section, I will investigate the techniques of alienation effect and montage, focusing on their political agency of

[34] Other translations of this concept include "the estrangement effect" and "the distancing effect." Despite my personal inclination toward these two, I adopt "the alienation effect" in the text because of Brecht's English translator John Willett's predominant translation in the collection, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1964).

denoting left-wing ideology. In tandem with the previous section on realism, my discussion of visual performativity plays a conceptual role for my case studies in the following chapters.

Inspired by Mei Lanfang's Beijing Opera performance, Brecht initiated his innovative dramaturgy in opposition to the prevalent Stanislavski's system.[35] As Brecht indicates, "the efforts in question were directed to playing in such a way that the audience was hindered from simply identifying itself with the characters in the play. Acceptance or rejection of their actions and utterances was meant to take place on a conscious plane, instead of, as hitherto, in the audience's subconscious."[36] Basically, he disapproves of the traditional aesthetics that encourages the audience to subconsciously identify with the performance.[37] Instead, Brecht advocates a "critical moment" in theatrical reception, so the spectators may have an opportunity to reflect on the stage presentation and enhance their understanding of reality. Specifically, he explains the mechanism of alienation effect as follows: "the artist's object is to appear strange and even surprising to the audience. He achieves this by looking strangely at himself and his work. As a result, everything put forward by him has a touch of the amazing. Everyday things are

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[35] For the Russian theater practitioner Konstantin Stanislavski, "the actor most likely to affect an audience profoundly is the actor who behaves most like a complete human being, thereby stirring not merely their emotions but their minds as well." (Jean Benedetti, *Stanislavski and the Actor: The Method of Physical Action*, London: Routledge, 1998, 2) Based on this "art of experiencing," Stanislavski holds that theatrics is supposed to offer a mimetic representation of real life and that the spectators are expected to identify themselves with the characters and receive the performance on the subconscious level.

[36] Bertolt Brecht, "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting," in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, trans. John Willett (London: Eyre Methuen, 1964), 91.

[37] In this sense, the Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* is regarded as a significant attempt to break "the fourth wall" in the history of drama.

thereby raised above the level of the obvious and automatic."[38] In other words, actors are supposed to alienate themselves from the normality of their roles. It is this performative alienation that not only hinders the spectators' subconscious identification with the play but also invites their reflective understanding of reality. At this point, Brecht shares with his close friend Benjamin a political prospect of aesthetics: while Benjamin envisions a transcendental perception through the lens of the camera, Brecht calls for a critical observation of reality by virtue of alienated performance. Based on the technique of alienation effect, Brecht pins hopes on the political agency of theater and proposes an "aesthetic redemption" in the theatrical space. Interestingly, he further integrates this performative maneuver into his aesthetic system in the name of realism, whose significance is dramatically different from that of Lukács and Italian neorealism.

In contrast to the Lukácsian realism featuring reflectivity, Brecht tends to celebrate realism centering on its practical dimension:

> Realistic means: discovering the causal complexes of society / unmasking the prevailing view of things as the view of those who are in power / writing from the standpoint of the class which offers the broadest solutions for the pressing difficulties in which human society is caught up / emphasizing the element of development / making possible the concrete, and making possible abstraction from it.[39]

At this point, Brecht calls attention to the dynamic nature of reality and the historical essence of society. For him, art forms should not only keep pace with the changing reality but also give expression to the progressiveness of history. On this basis, Brecht further stresses realism's

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[38] Brecht, "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting," 92.

[39] Bertolt Brecht, "Against Georg Lukács," in *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: NLB, 1977), 82.

efficacy in support of social mobilization: "it is the interest of the people, of the broad working masses, to receive a faithful image of life from literature, and faithful images of life are actually of service only to the people, the broad working masses, and must therefore be absolutely comprehensible and profitable to them – in other words, popular."[40] Compared with that of Lukács, this Brechtian realism focuses on the receptive dimension of art and is dedicated to fostering the proletarian revolution on the practical level. Ultimately, its aesthetic praxis lies in exerting influence on reality by providing the working class with the opportunity of unveiling the potential trend in society. Here, alienation effect serves as a dynamic device that may present a more authentic "reality effect" for the spectators by stimulating their critical consciousness. As Terry Eagleton sees it, this Brechtian realism featuring alienation effect is essentially an aesthetic strategy for the sake of political ideology:

> Realism for Brecht is less a specific literary style or genre, "a mere question of form," than a kind of art which discovers social laws and developments, and unmasks prevailing ideologies by adopting the standpoint of the class which offers the broadest solution to social problems. Such writing needs not necessarily involve verisimilitude, in the narrow sense of recreating the textures and appearances of things; it is quite compatible with the widest uses of fantasy and invention.[41]

For Eagleton, Brecht's dramaturgy is able to entail a transcendental revelation of reality in terms of both social development and ideological dominance. Compared with Lukács's stress on representation, this Brechtian realism shows a distinct feature of "[compatibility] with the widest uses of fantasy and invention," epitomized by the various forms of alienation effect. In the history of left-wing aesthetics, numerous artists, including Godard as a film director, conveyed

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[40] Ibid., 80.

[41] Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1976), 67.

their ideological progressiveness by celebrating the revolutionary performativity of alienation effect. Moreover, the cinematic technique of montage serves as another powerful means that technically facilitated Western leftist filmmakers' visualizations of communist China. In what follows, I will discuss montage by focusing on its dualistic modes initiated by Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov, in order to lay conceptual foundations for my case studies in the subsequent chapters.

In parallel with the representational technique of long take, montage appears as a significant device in the cinematic tradition inspired by Georges Méliès.[42] By "selecting, editing, and piecing together separate sections of film to form a continuous whole,"[43] it establishes a visual continuum and attributes additional meaning to the individual shots. In the history of film, montage as a technique wasn't full-fledged until the soviet filmmakers Eisenstein and Vertov developed its expressive agency. Historically, the emergence of montage was inseparable from the October Revolution in 1917. Regarding this connection between politics and aesthetics, Naum Gabo[44] offered a first-hand statement in 1920: "the blossoming of a new culture and a new civilization with their unprecedented-in-history surge of the masses towards the possession of the riches of Nature, a surge which binds the people into one union, and… the war and the

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[42] The Lumière brothers and Méliès are regarded as the dualistic pioneers of early film. While the former endeavored to document actual reality, the latter was dedicated to creating a believable fantasy through the cinematic lens. Historically, these two harbingers planted seeds for the later traditions of documentary film and fiction film, respectively.

[43] "montage, n. and adj.", OED Online, June 2016, Oxford University Press, http://www.oed.com.libproxy.utdallas.edu/view/Entry/121764?rskey=OkXFmj&result=1&isAdvanced=false (accessed July 22, 2016).

[44] Born Naum Neemia Pevsner, Naum Gabo was a prominent sculptor in the movement of Russian Constructivism and a pioneer of kinetic art.

revolution (those purifying torrents of the coming epoch), have made us face the fact of new forms of life, already born and active."[45] Basically, Gabo believes that the communist revolution has thoroughly transformed the social reality, and art should be accordingly renewed in order to adapt itself to the progressive condition of life. In other words, the political change in early twentieth-century Russia entailed a corresponding innovation of aesthetics. It was in this background that the cinematic movement of Soviet montage appeared on the scene.

A member of CPSU,[46] Eisenstein dedicated himself to agitprop, testified to by his conception of film as "influencing [the] audience in the desired direction through a series of calculated pressures on its psyche."[47] Basically, he considered cinema to be an instrument of mobilization, which artistically facilitates the transmission of ideology. With this political tendency, Eisenstein put forward his cinematography known as "montage of attractions": "a free montage with arbitrarily chosen independent… effects (attractions) but with the precise aim of a specific final thematic effect – montage of attractions."[48] Indeed, through creative editing, the filmmaker is able to produce a holistic meaning that transcends the sum total of the constituents' respective significance. It is based on this semantic mechanism that the Eisensteinian montage partakes of a persuasive function and may serve as an aesthetic means to a political end.

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[45] Naum Gabo, "The Realist Manifesto," in *The Tradition of Constructivism*, ed. Stephen Bann (New York: Da Capo, 1974), 7.

[46] CPSU is the abbreviation of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

[47] Sergei Eisenstein, "The Montage of Film Attractions," in *The Eisenstein Reader*, ed. Richard Taylor (London: British Film Institute, 1998), 35.

[48] Sergei Eisenstein, "The Montage of Attractions," in *The Eisenstein Reader*, ed. Richard Taylor (London: British Film Institute, 1998), 31.

Following this, many left-wing directors carried forward the ideological performativity of montage. By celebrating its leftist agency, they were committed to presenting visual agitations to the audience, in hopes of facilitating social revolutions in reality. In this regard, I would like to illustrate with two series of shots from the sequence of "Odessa Steps" in Eisenstein's masterpiece, *Battleship Potemkin* (1925).

Figure 1.3. "The Crowd Fleeing the Imperial Soldiers' Attack." *Battleship Potemkin*, directed by Sergei Eisenstein (1925; New York: Kino Lorber Films, 2007), DVD. (left)
Figure 1.4. "Wounded Civilians Falling from the Stairway." *Battleship Potemkin*. (right)

In general, *Battleship Potemkin* dramatizes a mutiny that occurred during the Russian Revolution of 1905, when the crew of the warship Potemkin rebelled against their officers. It was this seditious theme that largely induced Eisenstein's motivation of producing this work. As one of the best-known sequences in history, "Odessa Steps" appears as the fourth act of the movie, portraying the imperial army's attack on the civilians in support of the revolt. Overall, it offers a visual narrative of the crowd fleeing the marching soldiers (Figure 1.3) and the wounded falling from the stairway (Figure 1.4). Among more than 150 shots in this act, two montages stand out for their exceptional expressivity of left-wing ideology. In what follows, I will analyze them to demonstrate how montage may serve a political purpose in the case of leftist directors.

Figure 1.5. “The Death of a Boy Montage.” *Battleship Potemkin*.

At the beginning of “Odessa Steps,” Eisenstein presents a significant scene centering on the demise of a child (Figure 1.5). Amid the crowd, he first singles out a boy with his mother, who is pointing her finger to the distance. By suddenly zooming in on the red flag of the Potemkin, Eisenstein visually connects them with the mutiny on the battleship and discloses their inclination toward the revolution. During the subsequent crackdown, the camera focuses on the mother’s astounding face in the wake of her son’s being shot and fall on the steps. Devastated by this tragedy, she attempts to seek justice from the troop with the child’s body, before she herself is sadly killed by the shooters (Figure 1.6). Next, the director meaningfully exhibits a scene in which the shadows of soldiers overwhelm the woman’s corpse, symbolizing the ruling class’s ruthless dominance over the masses (Figure 1.7). Through these scenes, Eisenstein not only showcases the civilians’ progressive tendency but also reveals the army’s reactionary cruelty. Technically, this montage powerfully displays the tension between the Russian people and the Tsarist government and serves as a vivid illustration of the Marxist concept of class struggle. As

Robert Stam indicates, "Eisenstein privileged artistic discontinuity, seeing each fragment of film as part of a powerful semantic construction based on principles of juxtaposition and conflict rather than organic seamlessness."[49] It is based on this constructivist mechanism that social mobilization is actualized by means of visual presentation. A good hand of agitprop, the Eisensteinian montage excels at celebrating the political agency embedded in the assemblage of individual shots. For left-wing directors, it serves as a performative device with remarkable expressivity in ideological display.

Figure 1.6. "The Mother Approaching the Troop with Her Son's Body." *Battleship Potemkin*. (left)
Figure 1.7. "Mother's and Son's Bodies Overshadowed by the Soldiers." *Battleship Potemkin*. (right)

In contrast to Eisenstein's tendency of constructivism, the Vertovian montage is fundamentally in the representational mode. A pioneer of documentary film, Vertov highlights the revelatory function of montage and recognizes it as a device that enables a "cinematic decoding of both the visible world and that which is invisible to the naked eye."[50] He thinks film

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[49] Robert Stam, *Film Theory: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), 43.

[50] Dziga Vertov, "From Kino-Eye to Radio-Eye," in *Kino-eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, ed. Annette Michelson (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 87.

may not only document the physical world but also reveal the transcendental significance of reality. Based on this belief, Vertov passionately contends for a groundbreaking visuality: “I am kino-eye, I am a mechanical eye. I, a machine, show you the world as only I can see it.”[51] At this point, what we witness is an artistic ecstasy conditioned by technological advancement, or in Marxist terms, advanced productive forces. Moreover, this technology-based kino-eye corresponds to the progressiveness of the working class on the political level. This relevance is testified to by Vertov’s following statement: “to see and show the world in the name of the worldwide proletarian revolution – that is the most basic formula of the kinoks.”[52] Thus, the kino-eye cinematography connects technological progressiveness with historical progressiveness and serves as a cultural means by which the proletariat may penetrate the surface of the everyday and grasp the authenticity of life. As the aesthetic core of kino-eye, the Vertovian montage is most represented by the “marriage – divorce” scene (Figure 1.8) from his masterpiece *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929).

Starting with a panorama of a neighborhood, Vertov’s cinematic vision suddenly zooms in on the Department of Civil Affairs where a couple is registering their wedding. In the wake of another panorama in which the camera turns in the opposite direction, another couple is presented at the same counter filing for their divorce. With this string of montages, Vertov

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[51] Dziga Vertov, “Kinoks: A Revolution,” in *Kino-eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, 17. “Kino-eye,” literally cinema-eye, is the term that Vertov coined to describe his cinematography. For him, film is able to provide the human being with a more genuine visuality, for it “construct[s] the impressions of the day into an effective whole” and thus “obtains an organized memo of the ordinary eye’s impressions.” (“Kinoks: A Revolution,” 18-19) Ultimately, Vertov holds that cinema has a transcendental prowess that may extend the visual faculty of humans and enable a deeper sense of reality.

[52] Dziga Vertov, “Kinoglaz,” in *Kino-eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, 40.

assigns additional meaning to the shots and reveals the phenomenality of life: under the grand narrative symbolized by the panorama, individuals experience the sweetness or bitterness of their own lives. Indeed, the montage in this case virtually establishes a visual dialectic of individuality and totality. Ultimately, it manifests itself as a representational means for a revelatory end.

Figure 1.8. “Marriage – Divorce Montage.” *Man with a Movie Camera*, directed by Dziga Vertov (1929; New York: Kino Lorber Films, 2003), DVD.

Essentially, Vertov aims to offer a deep insight into the reality of life. And montage, on the technical level, serves as a semantic device that facilitates this phenomenological revelation. As he sees it, cinema is meant to “aid each oppressed individual and the proletariat as a whole in their effort to understand the phenomena of life around them.”[53] This visual transcendence, in the name of proletarian revolution, constitutes the converging point where political progressiveness and artistic progressiveness significantly intertwine. For Vertov and his

[53] Dziga Vertov, “The Essence of Kino-Eye,” in *Kino-eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, 49.

comrades, it is the leftist filmmaker's duty to reveal the most authentic truth and fight against the banal bourgeois culture. Thus, montage, in its dualistic modes of the Vertovian and the Eisensteinian, appears to be a "weapon of criticism" in support of the political revolution led by the proletariat.

What we have seen in this chapter is a theoretical account of the key concepts and techniques essential for the investigation into the issue of Red China through the lens of Western left-wing filmmakers. The first section delineates the cultural lineage of the radical directors: as the joint heir of Romanticism, modernism, and Marxism, they held a confrontational attitude toward capitalism and yearned for an aesthetic redemption by means of cinematography. In the second section, Benjamin's ambivalent viewpoint on film unveils the emancipatory force of cinema. Derived from technological advancement, this progressive dimension gives birth to a political agency that Western leftist filmmakers harnessed in their portraits of communist China. Centering on realism and performativity respectively, the last two sections offer a conceptual survey on the two major aesthetic notions relevant to the leftist films to be discussed.

In the following three chapters, I will substantiate my thesis by conducting case studies on the motion pictures produced by left-wing directors such as Marker, Godard, Antonioni, and Ivens. As aesthetic acts for political reasons, these movies initiate a space where issues such as aesthetics, politics, and cross-cultural communication mingle together. Fundamentally, the visual manifestation of these films and the political ideology of the directors constitute an intertextual field in which ample significance can be generated on the level of cultural politics. In Chapter Two, I will discuss the depiction of Red China in contemporary French film. Based on two accounts of the West's romanticized image of China and the cultural politics of the May revolt, I

will unravel the artistic dimension of the French Counterculture by analyzing two specific movies, Marker's *Sunday in Peking* (1956) and Godard's *La Chinoise* (1967).

CHAPTER 2

REVOLUTIONARY CHINOISERIE:

TRANSNATIONAL MAOISM AND CONTEMPORARY FRENCH FILM

After the Second World War, Western Europe underwent a period of revival with the assistance of the United States' Marshall Plan. By the end of the 1960s, the European material life had reached a visibly high level and entered the so-called "advanced industrial society" described by Herbert Marcuse. Nevertheless, the social structure of Western Europe failed to keep pace with the economic advancement at the same time. This was especially so in France. While *Les Trente Glorieuses*[1] witnessed a sensational prosperity of industry and commerce, the period engendered a series of social issues including the repressive atmosphere of Gaullism, the banality of the burgeoning consumer society, and low standards for higher education due to excessive enrollment and an antiquated curriculum. It was this imbalance between the development of infrastructure and that of superstructure that eventually gave rise to a series of cultural crises culminating in the May 1968 events in France.

Historically, the May revolt was largely inspired and influenced by the Cultural Revolution in China. This can be seen from the "three M's" on the Parisian banners of the day, "Marx/Mao/Marcuse." In this context, French leftist filmmakers exploited the image of communist China to facilitate their cinematic revolutions against capitalism. This cinematic trend

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[1] "The Glorious Thirty" in English, *Les Trente Glorieuses* refers to the boom of the economy and social welfare in postwar France spanning 1945 to 1975. As a historical term, it was coined by the French demographer Jean Fourastié in his 1979 book, *Les Trente Glorieuses, ou la révolution invisible de 1946 à 1975* (*The Glorious Thirty, or the Invisible Revolution from 1946 to 1975*).

is highly comparable to the aesthetic of chinoiserie dating back to eighteenth-century Europe, when European artists had a fascination with the exotic East and deployed Chinese visual elements in their artistic creations (Figures 2.1 and 2.2). In a way, the French films featuring the image of Red China can be viewed as a "revolutionary chinoiserie" that embodies the leftist directors' critique of the bourgeoisie and interest in Chinese communism. Contextualized in the French counterculture, these works not only signify the Maoist impact on contemporary France but also serve as visual illustrations of European radical thought in opposition to postwar capitalism.

Figure 2.1. "The Toilette." François Boucher. Oil on Canvas. 1742. (left)
Figure 2.2. "The Chinese Garden." François Boucher. Oil on Canvas. 1742. (right)

In this chapter, I will discuss the Chinese influence on French left-wing film by combining the methods of historical inquiry and visual analysis. Specifically, the first section investigates the romanticized image of China in the West, highlighting the concepts of "Confucian utopia" and "revolutionary utopia." In the second section, I will consider the cultural politics of the French Counterculture, with a concentration on Maoism's ideological connection with European leftist thought. The last two sections will lay emphasis on two specific films, Marker's *Sunday in Peking* (1956) and Godard's *La Chinoise* (1967). With distinct styles, these

movies not only demonstrate the diverse presentations of Maoism in contemporary French film but also offer an opportunity to investigate the relationship between left-wing politics and left-wing aesthetics.

2.1. The Romanticized Image of China: From Confucian to Revolutionary Utopia

On the historical level, "revolutionary chinoiserie" appears as a continuation of the classic issue of China's image in the West. Here, it is necessary to review the historical trajectory of the Western image of China, so that my dissertation topic, Western leftist filmmakers' visual representation of Chinese communism, can be considered in a broader context. In this section, my goal is to examine the romanticized dimension of China's image in the West. Highlighting the concepts of "Confucian utopia" and "revolutionary utopia," I will lay emphasis on contemporary French intellectuals' perceptions of Chinese communism, with the purpose of situating "revolutionary chinoiserie" in the historical context of Sino-French communication.

In medieval Europe, China was mainly portrayed as a vast and wealthy land ruled by the philosophical king. This romantic depiction, represented by *The Travels of Marco Polo*, manifests itself as a hybridity of historical record and imaginary narrative. This well-known travelogue, on the one hand, embodies thirteenth-century Europeans' keen aspiration to explore the Orient; on the other hand, it initiated an Orientalist dimension embedded in the Western image of China, that is, the portrait of China fundamentally serves as a utopianized "other" in support of the Westerner's self-reflection. From Marco Polo's perspective, Chinese people's affluence and peacefulness appear to be highly admirable, for they historically catered to the indigenous situation of medieval Europe, where material scarcity and social conflict were widespread. In other words, it was thirteenth-century Europe's abominable condition that

propelled Marco Polo to glorify China as an ideal "other." Since *The Travels of Marco Polo*, this utopianization of China based on the Westerner's own value has appeared as a constant phenomenon in the history of China-West encounters.

In early modern Europe, the romanticized image of China was further developed into a "Confucian utopia" by philosophers such as Gottfried Leibniz and Christian Wolff. Specifically, the Leibnizian "Confucian utopia" was ideologically aimed at the religious chaos of eighteenth-century Europe, given that Confucianism and Leibniz's theological intellectualism shared a common belief that realistic order should be derived from transcendental reason. From Leibniz's perspective, China was such an ideal nation based on the ethical reason of Confucianism, whereas Europe lapsed into sectarianism and failed to maintain a healthy social order. This moral contrast between China and the West, as we will see in the following parts of this dissertation, manifests itself as a significant dimension in the history of China-West communication.

Following Leibniz, Christian Wolff further extracted a Platonic philosophical king from the governance of Confucianism and considered China to be a land filled with happiness:

> The Chinese emperors therefore, the founders of the empire were furnished with a stock of philosophy, and by its means they modelled their government… For as they had, and not unhappily, reduced the direction or conduct of a family or house to self-direction, arguing by virtue of a determinate similitude from self-direction, or the conduct of one's own person or body to the management of a family; so at length they came to reduce the notion of a commonwealth to that of a house or family, and under the person of the head of the family represented to themselves a ruler, or governor, thus arguing again by virtue of a determinate similitude from a family to a civil society.[2]

For Wolff, the Chinese emperors could systematically deduce proper statecraft by following the Confucian doctrine in "The Great Learning": "the ancients who wished to illustrate illustrious

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[2] Christian Wolff, *Real Happiness of a People under a Philosophical King* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2010), 21-22.

virtue throughout the kingdom, first order well their own States. Wishing to order well their States, they first regulated their families. Wishing to regulate their families, they first cultivated their persons, they first rectified their hearts."[3] In other words, the philosophical king should go through a series of stages including self-cultivation, household management, and state governance, before he is competent to bestow happiness on the people under his rule. Wolff's stress on this Confucian creed has underlying reasons: on the one hand, the doctrine's deductive tendency corresponds to the Leibniz-Wolffian metaphysics, which features a rationalistic conception of the world on both epistemological and ethical levels; on the other hand, the Confucian notion of "philosophical king" is consistent with Wolff's tendency toward enlightened absolutism and thus serves as a conceptual projection of his own political ideal. In modern times, this Wolffian "philosophical king of China" echoed in Western leftists' positive accounts of Mao Tse-tung, epitomized by Edgar Snow's *Red Star over China*.

During the Enlightenment, the concept of China as a "Confucian utopia" was further celebrated by Voltaire in opposition to the established Christianity. To some degree, Voltaire intentionally transferred Enlightenment values to China and idealized it into a rational and ethical land in contrast to eighteenth-century Europe, which he saw as riddled with theocracy and tyranny. Beyond Leibniz's and Wolff's philosophical reflections, Voltaire further deployed China as a "weapon of criticism" pertaining to the situation of the Enlightenment. To maximize the political agency of Confucianism, he even adapted a thirteenth-century Chinese play, *The Orphan of Zhao*, into a French drama, *The Orphan of China* (1753), with an emphasis on its

[3] Confucius, *Confucian Analects, The Great Learning, and The Doctrine of the Mean*, trans. James Legge (New York: Dover Publications, 1971), 357.

Confucian values of benevolence and righteousness. In general, Voltaire's fascination with Chinese culture marked the zenith of China as a "Confucian utopia." After him, philosophers such as Montesquieu, Rousseau, Hegel, and Herder initiated a trend toward belittling China in the names of despotism and stagnation. Regarding the transformations of China's image in the West, Ming Dong Gu argues that the Europeans were engaged in an intellectual activity for which he gives the name "sinologism":

> Sinologism as an intellectual commodity changes in accordance with the demand for China knowledge in different historical periods and by different geographical areas. In one historical period, it took on a romantic picture of Khan's empire described by Marco Polo; in another historical period, it is represented as the ideal state ruled by philosopher-kings in Leibniz and Voltaire's accounts; in still another historical period, it was bleakly presented as a fossilized civilization like a mummy; in modern times, it assumed the scary image of Red China with the menacing power of the Yellow Peril in history.[4]

Indeed, China as a "Confucian utopia" was an externalization of the Europeans' anxiety about their own culture, exemplified by the cases of Marco Polo, Leibniz, Wolff, and Voltaire. Essentially, their compliments to Confucius's China are not so much an assessment of the other as an expectation of self. In the wake of the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution, Europe distinguished itself from the rest of the world for its unprecedented level of material civilization. This great leap not only gave rise to a Eurocentrism in epistemology but also engendered an ideology of progressivism that claimed a linear development of human history. On these accounts, the motivation of romanticizing China for the sake of Europe ceased to exist, followed by a depreciation of Chinese history for its cyclical trajectory.

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[4] Ming Dong Gu, *Sinologism: An Alternative to Orientalism and Postcolonialism* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 221.

After the Opium Wars in the mid-nineteenth century, the enfeebled situation of China resulted in a dystopian image of China in the West, illustrated by the racist ideology of the Yellow Peril and the stereotypical character of Dr. Fu Manchu. In 1949, the establishment of the PRC constituted a historical point from which the Western image of China bifurcated. On the one hand, mainstream Westerners regarded China as a communist dystopia under the atmosphere of the Cold War. On the other hand, many Western progressives were excited about the rise of Red China and romanticized it as a "revolutionary utopia." This image, which can be viewed as a contemporary counterpart of "Confucian utopia," serves as a context in which the significance of European leftist filmmakers' movies about China unfolds.

Historically, the Western utopianization of Red China emerged earlier than the official founding of the PRC. In June 1936, the American journalist Edgar Snow arrived at Bao'an, where the headquarters of the communist regime were located. In the following four months, he visited the Shaanxi-Gansu-Ningxia Liberated Areas and interviewed CPC leaders such as Mao Tse-tung, Peng Dehuai, and Xu Haidong. In 1937, Snow published *Red Star over China* in London and rose to fame for introducing the Chinese revolution to the world. In this book, he sketched the promising territory of the CPC and highly regarded the achievement of Chinese communism:

> What this "communism" amounted to in a way was that, for the first time in history, thousands of educated youths, stirred to great dreams themselves by a universe of scientific knowledge to which they were suddenly given access, "returned to the people," went to the deep soil-base of their country, to "reveal" some of their new-won learning to the intellectually sterile countryside, the dark-living peasantry, and sought to enlist its alliance in building a "more abundant life."[5]

[5] Edgar Snow, *Red Star over China* (New York: Grove Press, 1968), 125.

For Snow, communism integrated the most advanced productivity with the overwhelming majority of Chinese people and functioned as an effective cure for the social evils of China. Significantly, it aroused the country's youth and inspired them to participate in the front line of the revolution. Based on the collaboration between young intellectuals and the proletariat, the American journalist envisioned a new China teeming with dynamism and hope. In large part, Snow attributed this accomplishment to the leader of the CPC, Mao Tse-tung: "it was nothing quick or flashy, but a kind of solid elemental vitality. One felt that whatever there was extraordinary in this man grew out of the uncanny degree to which he synthesized and expressed the urgent demands of millions of Chinese, and especially the peasantry."[6] From Snow's perspective, Mao's greatness lay in his leadership in the Chinese revolution and his charisma that heralded a new prospect for China. Here, what we witness is the modern recurrence of the Wolffian "philosophical king." Indeed, the character of Mao combined intellectuality and down-to-earthness and manifested itself as a progressive alternative to Western statesmanship. In a way, Mao's China for Snow is comparable to Confucius's China for Leibniz and Voltaire, given that both images signify an idealized otherness in contrast to their Western counterparts of the day.

After the publication of *Red Star over China*, a few more leftists from the West visited the CPC's Liberated Areas and reported the Chinese revolution to the world; prominent works include Anna Louise Strong's *One Fifth of Mankind* (1938), Agnes Smedley's *China Fights Back: An American Woman with the Eighth Route Army* (1938), and Haldore Hanson's *Humane Endeavour: The Story of the China War* (1939). Like Snow, these authors accorded high regard

[6] Ibid., 90.

to Mao and the communist movement under his leadership. During wartime, their accounts of Chinese communism aroused considerable echoes in the West and constituted an ideological support to the Chinese battlefield of WWII.

In 1949, the triumph of China's communist revolution further excited Western leftists. Driven by their progressive initiative, they were interested in the social construction of Red China, in hopes of finding an ideal "other" for their own societies. Historically, the Bandung Conference in 1955 provided the Chinese premier Zhou Enlai with the opportunity to invite people around the world to "come and see" the New China.[7] One after another, many foreign intellectuals paid their visits to China, including Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir on behalf of French left-wing intellectuals.

From September to November in 1955, Sartre and Beauvoir spent 45 days in several Chinese cities and collected first-hand information on Chinese society. At the Chinese authorities' request, Sartre soon published "My Impressions of the New China" in *People's Daily*, the most significant mouthpiece of the PRC. In this article, he commended the development of China and extolled Chinese communism from a philosopher's perspective: "in China, the direct reality points to the future. Therefore, what we witness through your lens is a world from which we have already departed. This doesn't make us feel sad at all. Instead, you Chinese have passed us your patience and humility. It is because of you, your labor, and your

[7] Dedicated to promoting Afro-Asian cooperation, the Bandung Conference in 1955 was a meeting of newly independent Asian and African countries held in Bandung, Indonesia. During this conference, the Chinese premier Zhou Enlai played an important role and manifested a conciliatory attitude on behalf of the PRC.

faith that the future has come to us."[8] Disappointed in contemporary France, Sartre considered Chinese communism to be a superior mode of production that heralds the future of humankind. Moreover, he discerned an effective governance of Chinese society and thought highly of its systematic efficacy: "your comprehensive and dialectical spirits let you tackle issues on the holistic level. Rather than treating things separately, you always combine the most diverse social phenomena and deal with them as a whole. From your words, we can learn how a certain department's progress will eventually facilitate the entire society's progress."[9] In a later interview, Sartre further praised China for its attainment of social mobilization: "I was overwhelmed by the unity of purpose shared by the people and their leaders. One of the many things that are disappearing in China is the passivity of the masses. They have confidence in their leaders, and they are working towards the realization of concrete objectives which are presented to them with simplicity and clarity. I call it the auto-determination of the masses."[10] As he saw it at that time, communism had integrated Chinese society into an organic whole, and the individuality of civilians and the totality of the nation had reached a desirable balance that gives impetus to the overall development of China. Ideologically, this idealized picture has roots in Sartre's existentialism, which underlines the human being's individuality and self-determinism. For Sartre, Chinese communism seemed to be a place where "hell is [not] other people" and thus catered to his fundamental concept of "auto-determination." Given that Sartre's knowledge of

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[8] Jean-Paul Sartre, "My Impressions of the New China," *People's Daily* (Beijing), November 2, 1955.

[9] Ibid.

[10] K. S. Karol, "Sartre Views the New China," *New Statesman and Nation*, December 3, 1955, 738.

China was rudimentary and that the reality of China in the 1950s was far from satisfactory, it can be said that his compliment to Chinese communism was not so much a realistic evaluation as a subjective projection through his philosophical lens.

In the context of the Cold War, Sartre's utopianization of Red China was harshly criticized by mainstream French media. Against these attacks, he held a press conference on his China trip and published a series of supportive articles in *Les Temps modernes*, a left-wing journal that he was aligned with. In 1957, Beauvoir joined the battle by publishing her book *The Long March*, in which she delineated her experience in China and voiced her observations on this nascent communist country.

On her flight to Beijing, Beauvoir envisaged a China in a balance of traditional heritage and progressive momentum: "I anticipated China, at once orderly and fantastic, where poverty had the mildness of abundance, a China which, despite the severity of the tasks to be performed, enjoys a freedom unknown in other Eastern places."[11] For her, China appears as a miraculous place where contraries such as tradition and innovation, old and new, order and fantasy, poverty and abundance, as well as severity and freedom are blended in harmony. With this romantic image in mind, Beauvoir set foot in China and started her incarnated exploration into Chinese society.

In response to the French anti-communists' censure that Chinese people are as homogeneous as "blue-clad ants," Beauvoir makes the following statement regarding the commonality of dressing in China:

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[11] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Long March*, trans. Austryn Wainhouse (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1958), 10-11.

> The fact is that in Peking blue trousers and jackets seem to be as ineluctable as black hair: these two colors go so well together, blend so happily with the lights and shadows of the city that there are moments when you would think you were walking through a scene from Cézanne… Homogeneity does not signify sameness. As a matter of fact, I know of no place where uniformity reigns so thoroughly and to such disastrous effect as in the better districts and drawing rooms of Paris, where the individual indefatigably manifests his class and is devoured by it.[12]

As a left-wing intellectual, Beauvoir penetrates the pseudo-individuality of the Parisian fashion and realizes the internal sameness of bourgeois culture. It is based on this supposition that she perceives the Chinese uniformity of apparel as an alternative beauty rather than a sign of repression as the anti-communists contend. To some degree, what Beauvoir describes as the equality-based individuality in China stems from her moralistic antipathy to the Cultural Industry of capitalism and is essentially a romanticized account of Chinese people's living conditions of the day.

On the evening of October 1, 1955, Beauvoir was invited to join the National-Day celebrations on the rostrum of Tiananmen, where she had an opportunity to observe the paramount leaders of China in person:

> Never before have I seen official dignitaries whom their positions did not hold some distance apart from the rest of the crowd. This thoroughgoing simplicity is not demagogues; the Americans – Truman, Eisenhower, for example – are demagogues: with more or less success they mimic the guileless good guy and smile the million-dollar smile. Mao, Chou are not comedians. They have this inimitable naturalness you scarcely find anywhere save among the Chinese – a naturalness which perhaps comes from their profound ties with the peasantry and with the soil – and the serene modesty of men too involved in the world to worry about their television appearance.[13]

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[12] Ibid., 53-54.

[13] Ibid., 429-30.

As in the previous case, Beauvoir establishes a contrast between Chinese and Western statesmanship. Disapproving of the American politicians' conventional affectation, she is fascinated by the Chinese leaders' spontaneous charisma rooted in their revolutionary careers. One more time, although her description of the relationship between the Chinese leaders and their people are largely true, her account is heavily tinged with a modern version of "an exotic utopia under the governance of philosophical kings" initiated by Wolff and Snow. Drawing attention to the social equality of China, Beauvoir highly regards Chinese communism and deems the PRC a revolutionary paradise based on her leftist ideal.

After Sartre and Beauvoir, many more Western leftists visited China to explore its socialist construction. Driven by their critiques of capitalism, they yearned for an alternative social mode that might make up for the deficiency of their own societies. As Paul Hollander sees it, Red China had a multidimensional attraction for Westerners and particularly served as a shrine for these radical pilgrims: "for the puritan, a hard-working, simple, efficiently modernizing country; for the cultural connoisseur, thousands of years of Chinese culture; for the frustrated leftist, a Marxist-Leninist regime restoring the good name of Marxism; above all, and for most visitors, there was a land of mystery, beauty, purpose, and order…."[14] Among these left-wing travelers, the delegation of *Tel Quel* in 1974 stands out as a prominent group.

Founded by Philippe Sollers in 1960, *Tel Quel* was a Parisian journal whose collaborators included progressive thinkers such as Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Julia Kristeva. Under the flag of Maoism since 1971, *Tel Quel* published a sizable number of

[14] Paul Hollander, *Political Pilgrims: Travels of Western Intellectuals to the Soviet Union, China and Cuba, 1928-1978* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 287.

articles in favor of the PRC. Consequently, its editorial members, including Barthes and Kristeva, were invited by the Chinese authorities to take a trip to China from April 11 to May 4, 1974. In his relevant writings, Barthes made intriguing comments on China through his philosophical lens of poststructuralism. In the first place, he showed great interest in China's characteristic genre of art, calligraphy:

> In China, calligraphy is probably the most notable signifier. Through the wall manuscripts (they are everywhere) and the brush of the anonymous calligrapher (a worker or a peasant), its incredible impulse… integrates the pressure of the body and the tension of struggle into a single act. And Mao's calligraphy, reproduced on all scales, signs the Chinese space (a factory hall, a park, or a bridge) with a lyrical, elegant, and grassy integrity. In China, admirable art of this kind is ubiquitous, and it is more convincing for us than the heroic hagiography that we have learned elsewhere.[15]

As a semiotician, Barthes considers calligraphy to be an advanced art form, given that it highlights a symbolic dynamism in contrast to Western art's visual pattern of verisimilitude. In particular, he is interested in the spatial deployment of Mao's calligraphy: on the one hand, it serves as an ornament to the embodiment of China's socialist construction; on the other hand, it attributes a revolutionary sublimity to the public space and functions as a stimulating sign of mobilization.[16]

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[15] Roland Barthes, "La Chine, comme l'a vue Roland Barthes," *Le Monde* (Paris), May 24, 1974.

[16] It is worth mentioning that Barthes repeatedly commended Mao's calligraphy for its artistic value. More examples can be found in his travel notes: "all the same this country which, next to the cheap portrait-posters, shows an abundance of Mao's calligraphy: age-old elegance, poetry, personal form. It's an absolute counter-vulgarity." "Calligraphy by Mao. A lot of it. They're more and more beautiful. Their only work of art." "Calligraphies. What a change. At thirteen, highly personal calligraphy, tending to the cursive. The drying line proves the instinctual drive behind it (you find a lot of this in Mao)." (Roland Barthes, *Travels in China*, Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2012, 42, 44, 62.)

Moreover, Barthes extended his survey of China into the realm of socio-political signification: “China is peaceful. For us, this peacefulness (the onomastics of Chinese always refers to this word) constitutes a utopia where the war of signification is abolished. In China, meaning is dissolved or exempted where we Westerners examine closely, while it remains standing, armed, articulate and offensive where we are reluctant to put it: politics.”[17] Here, he differentiates Chinese and Western modes of signification based on his theory of mythology. Specifically, Barthes considers bourgeois culture as “myth today” and further reveals its ideological nature: “myth is depoliticized speech… Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact.”[18] Basically, he believes that capitalism has a deceptive mechanism that may neutralize real power in operation into depoliticized speech, or, in his terms, myth. By contrast, Red China not only features an absence of bourgeois mythology but also manifests a direct expression of political speech. For Barthes, this Chinese peculiarity exhibits a semiotic progressiveness, because it has superseded ideological manipulation and resumed the due correspondence between the signifier and the signified. On the textual level, this revelation is reflected in his travel note: “signifier: don’t include clothing: it’s here on the side of the signified.”[19]

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[17] Barthes, “La Chine, comme l’a vue Roland Barthes.”

[18] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1972), 142-43.

[19] Barthes, *Travels in China*, 144.

In *Mythologies*, Barthes offers a conceptual framework within which his observations on the Chinese mode of signification can be unraveled: "just as bourgeois ex-nomination characterizes at once bourgeois ideology and myth itself, revolutionary denomination identifies revolution and the absence of myth. The bourgeoisie hides the fact that it is the bourgeoisie and thereby produces myth; revolution announces itself openly as revolution and thereby abolishes myth."[20] In other words, revolution's moral goodness is rooted in its semiotic correspondence, given that social values are linguistically constructed from the poststructuralist point of view. Disgusted with the Western "war of signification," Barthes is impressed by the omnipresent political speech in China and deems the PRC a "peaceful utopia" that is immune to bourgeois mythology. My analysis of Barthes's fascination with China and its art suggests that, once again, what we witness is how leftist pilgrims' epistemological foci in perceiving China serves the purpose of idealizing the country based on its alterity relative to the West. In this regard, Paul Hollander's insight is highly illuminating:

> The intellectuals (and non-intellectuals) visiting China in the 1960s and early 1970s shared, to a varying degree, a disenchantment with excesses of individualism, the moral relativism and ethical uncertainties of their own societies. The sharply defined and binding values of Chinese society appeared as refreshingly firm guideposts to life which freed people of the burden of agonizing choices, of living with ambiguity and uncertainty. The moral vacuum painfully felt in the West did not exist here. The sense of purpose so much in evidence was all the more impressive because of the vast number of people whose life it had seemingly permeated.[21]

Basically, Red China's semiotic simplicity and moral certainty beget a "revolutionary utopia" in contrast to the Western leftists' own societies. It is this distinct otherness that fosters their interest

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[20] Barthes, *Mythologies*, 147.

[21] Hollander, *Political Pilgrims: Travels of Western Intellectuals to the Soviet Union, China and Cuba, 1928-1978*, 299.

in Chinese communism and their representations of China by verbal or cinematic means. As Zhou Ning, a Chinese scholar who has conducted extensive studies of China's images in the West, writes, "an exotic civilization is not important in itself, unless it, as a cultural 'other,' can represent the anxiety, terror, hope, and aspiration existent in local culture's unconscious and further make local culture discover its available value which can be transformed into a power of self-liberation and self-transcendence."[22] Indeed, the romanticized images of China – from "Confucian utopia" to "revolutionary utopia" – are not so much realistic portrayals of the other's actuality as subjective projections of the Westerners committed to self-reflection and self-improvement in reference to China. As the contemporaries of Sartre, Beauvoir, and Barthes, French directors such as Chris Marker and Jean-Luc Godard exploited the image of Red China to demonstrate their left-wing sentiment.

2.2. Marx/Mao/Marcuse: The Cultural Politics of the French Counterculture

After the Liberation of France in 1944, Marxism prevailed among French intellectuals for its moral progressiveness consistent with the resistance movement during WWII: "like the generation of the thirties, they saw revolution, in this case the continuation and completion of the experience and objectives of the Resistance, as the only solution, the only way to prevent France from slipping backwards."[23] In 1956, this ideological trend was diminished by Khrushchev's discrediting of Stalin and the suppression of the Hungarian uprising. Nevertheless, the disillusionment with Soviet communism did not dissuade French leftists from their political

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[22] Zhou Ning, *The Celestial Empire Is Far Away: Studies on the Western Images of China* (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2006), 89.

[23] Tony Judt, *Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944-1956* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992), 36.

persistence. Besides the tendency toward radical thought in the realm of higher education, the 1966 outbreak of the Cultural Revolution in China offered an alternative mode of communism to that of the Soviet Union and unfolded a new prospect for radical activists. In the following decade, Maoism became a political fashion in France and played an important role in the vicissitudes of the Fifth Republic. This phenomenon was duly reflected in the May revolt's cult of three iconic figures: Marx, Mao, and Marcuse.

Regarding the Chinese impact on the May 1968 events, Richard Wolin provides an insightful observation:

> The less these *normaliens* knew about contemporary China, the better it suited their purposes. Cultural Revolutionary China became a projection screen, a Rorschach test, for their innermost radical political hopes and fantasies, which in de Gaulle's France had been deprived of a real-world outlet. China became the embodiment of a "radiant utopian future." By "becoming Chinese," by assuming new identities as French incarnations of China's Red Guards, these dissident Althusserians sought to reinvent themselves wholesale. Thereby, they would rid themselves of their guilt both as the progeny of colonialists and, more generally, as bourgeois.[24]

In this paragraph, Wolin delineates the zeitgeist of 1960s France and sums up Maoism's ideological significance to the French counterculture. Specifically, Charles de Gaulle's centralized authority produced an economic boom for the country, but it also achieved this at a cost in the suppression of individuality among the masses. This repressive atmosphere of Gaullism, along with the banality of the burgeoning consumer society, not only resulted in the May 1968 events but also gave rise to a series of radical thinking in opposition to bourgeois society. It was in this context that Maoism came into the picture and served as an ideological support for the May activists' political stand. In this section, I will investigate the connection

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[24] Wolin, *The Wind from the East: French Intellectuals, the Cultural Revolution, and the Legacy of the 1960s*, 3.

between European left-wing thought and Maoism, with the purpose of clarifying the philosophical basis for the emergence of "revolutionary chinoiserie" in contemporary French film.

Among the trio of "Marx, Mao, Marcuse," Marx is known as the founder of Marxism, a salient school of thought dedicated to the critique of capitalism. Historically, it gave rise to both European left-wing thought and Maoism in their respective contexts. A former Young Hegelian, Marx is indebted to Hegel's ideas, among which the concept of alienation stands out in his criticism of mainstream modernity. In "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," the young Marx examines alienation, once purely philosophical for Hegel, in the societal context. For him, organized mass production causes the objectification of human labor in the form of commodity. Thus, "the more the worker spends himself, the more powerful the alien objective world becomes which he creates over-against himself, the poorer he himself – his inner world – becomes, the less belongs to him as his own."[25] In a nutshell, under the capitalist condition, what the subject creates in turn dominates the subject itself. During the May revolt, this concept of alienation constituted the philosophical foundation of the French leftist's struggle against the Gaullist government and postwar capitalism.

In the light of alienation, Marx launches a "practical turn" in opposition to metaphysics. For him, it is praxis rather than speculation that ultimately serves as the path to the truth, which, for Marx, is historical in essence. Furthermore, he believes that the development of human society rests on the dynamism between infrastructure, mainly referring to economic factors, and

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[25] Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), 72.

superstructure, which embodies socio-cultural elements such as politics, religion, law, and arts. In this framework, he vehemently attacks the bourgeoisie in his far-reaching polemic, "Manifesto of the Communist Party." Specifically, capitalism, on the one hand, surpasses the erstwhile modes of production in terms of productivity and real achievement; on the other hand, it possesses a disquieting fluidity derived from its immanent instability. Based on this dialectical understanding of capitalism, Marx points out a systematic deprivation of individuality with alienation as the mechanism: "in bourgeois society capital is independent and has individuality, while the living person is dependent and has no individuality."[26] Through the processes such as industrialization, marketization, urbanization, and globalization, capitalism undermines the individuality of the human being and actualizes an overwhelming social totality. Faced with this situation, Marx advocated an international proletarian revolution by means of class struggle, with the purpose of abolishing private ownership and establishing a communist society in which "the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all."[27] However, this prospect of communism was soon thwarted in history, marked by the failure of the Paris Commune in 1871. Despite its triumph in Eastern countries such as Russia and China, the communist movement lowered its banners in Western Europe after the dissolution of the Second International in 1914. Nevertheless, the decline of "criticism of the weapon" historically begot a rise of "the weapon of criticism," which, from Martin Jay's perspective, "was developed partly in response to the failure of traditional Marxism to explain the reluctance of the proletariat to

[26] Ibid., 485.

[27] Ibid., 491.

fulfill its historical role."[28] In this trend, known as the Frankfurt School's Critical Theory, Herbert Marcuse was distinguished for his visible influence on the May 1968 events in France.

As the headstream of contemporary European left-wing thought, "the Frankfurt School put itself in a long line of thinkers whose utopian visions were less blueprints for action than sources of critical distance from the gravitational pull of the prevailing reality."[29] In contrast to the Paris Commune's violent revolution, the Frankfurt scholars waged a philosophical war against postwar capitalism, or, in Marcuse's terms, "advanced industrial society." In line with Horkheimer and Adorno's critique of Enlightenment modernity, Marcuse denounced social totality from a combined perspective of Freudianism and Marxism. In 1955, he published the first edition of *Eros and Civilization*, whose title responded to Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930). In this polemical book, Marcuse holds that individuality is categorically subjected to the capitalist mode of production: "in a repressive society, individual happiness and productive development are in contradiction to society; if they are defined as values to be realized within this society, they become themselves repressive."[30] For him, postwar capitalism not only attains the pinnacle of material civilization but also maximizes the suppression of individual eros. To resist this systematic alienation, Marcuse calls for an emancipation of the individual's instinctual desire: "for left to itself, and supported by a free intelligence aware of the potentialities of liberation from the reality of repression, the libidinal energy generated by the id

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[28] Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950*, 116.

[29] Ibid., 279.

[30] Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1974), 245.

would thrust against its ever more extraneous limitations and strive to engulf an ever larger field of existential relations, thereby exploding the reality ego and its repressive performances."[31] In other words, the celebration of eros may facilitate the individual to realize and further transcend the repressive social totality. Historically, it was this Marcusian proposition that constituted the philosophical basis for the "libidinal politics" of both French and American countercultures in the 1960s.

In 1964, the publication of *One-dimensional Man* had a more direct impetus to the May 1968 events in France. Against the burgeoning consumer society, Marcuse maintains that "advanced industrial society" embodies a new type of totalitarianism that stealthily fosters social homogeneity by means of technological reason. For him, it is modern technology that embodies ideological significance and eventually actualizes the prevailing forms of social and psychological control. On the individual level, "the loss of [the inner] dimension, in which the power of negative thinking – the critical power of Reason – is at home, is the ideological counterpart to the very material process in which advanced industrial society silences and reconciles the opposition."[32] In other words, the dominance of technological reason strangles the negative thinking of individuals and finally shapes them into "one-dimensional men." Based on this understanding of alienation, the May protesters gained a more incisive awareness of their living conditions: "we are what we do and what others do to us, the roles that we play in the social apparatus. Work is no longer merely activity, production, and profession. It is

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[31] Ibid., 48.

[32] Herbert Marcuse, *One-dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 10-11.

relationships, communication, and status. Leisure is no longer withdrawal into oneself, one's family, or one's neighborhood group. The culture is controlled and transmitted centrally."[33] This oppressive milieu, featuring the Marcusian one-dimensionality, historically affected numerous French left-wing thinkers, among whom Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, and Guy Debord stood out for their high relevance to transnational Maoism and the May 1968 events in France.

Among Western Marxists, Althusser is known for his innovative fusion of structuralism and Marxism. Throughout the 1960s, he offered seminars at the *École Normale Supérieure* (ENS), the base camp of French Maoists, where he fostered many eminent Marxists, including Pierre Macherey, Étienne Balibar, and Jacques Rancière. Regarding the Althusserian transformation of Marxism, François Dosse underlines the expulsion of subjectivity:

> If structural linguists attacked literary history limited to the author and the work, and anthropologists and psychoanalysts circumvented models of consciousness, Althusserian philosophers also sought to joyfully bury humanism like the pitiful remnants of a bygone era of triumphant bourgeois thinking. Man was the object of a dismissal; he should surrender his arms and soul and submit to the various logics that condition him and of which he is only a miserable speck.[34]

Based on Saussurian linguistics and Levi-Straussian anthropology, structuralism bears an intrinsic tendency toward decentralizing the subject. For instance, Ferdinand de Saussure contends that significance, rather than stemming from the subject's consciousness, lies in the conventional relationship between the signifier and the signified. Therefore, the structuralist tends to believe that it is not the human being that speaks language; instead, language speaks the

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[33] Alain Touraine, *The May Movement: Revolt and Reform*, trans. Leonard Mayhew (New York: Random House, 1971), 59.

[34] François Dosse, *History of Structuralism, Volume 1: The Rising Sign, 1945-1966*, trans. Deborah Glassman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 291.

human being. Inspired by this decentralization, Althusser modifies the Marxist theory of reflection and proposes a "structured totality in which meaning [is] a function of the position of each of the elements of the mode of production."[35] In this framework, the infrastructure is no longer a categorical determinant, and the superstructure possesses a relative autonomy and may substantially influence social transformation. Among the superstructural elements, Althusser singles out ideology for its political dynamism in place of the subject.

To begin with, Althusser differentiates the Repressive State Apparatuses (RSA) from the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA). While the former includes violent institutions like the police, the courts, and prisons, the latter, featuring the dynamic role of ideology, finds its social embodiments such as the family, the church, education, the media, and art. As Althusser sees it, the ISA "teaches 'know-how,' but in forms which ensure subjection to the ruling ideology or the mastery of its 'practice.'"[36] In other words, it functions to produce social consensus in favor of the dominator. From the structuralist perspective, Althusser further unravels the significance of this domination: "it is in the forms and under the forms of ideological subjection that provision is made for the reproduction of the skills of labor power."[37] Rather than a false consciousness to be transcended as it seems to Marx, ideology, for Althusser, serves as a structural factor that contributes to the maintenance of social reproduction. It is through this ideological subjection that modern society achieves its sustainable development.

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[35] Ibid., 304.

[36] Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays,* trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972), 133.

[37] Ibid.

Based on the political agency of the ISA, Althusser recalls the dislodged subject and indicates its subjected nature in modern society: "all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects, by the functioning of the category of the subject… the individual is interpellated as a (free) subject in order that he shall submit freely to the commandments of the Subject, i.e. in order that he shall (freely) accept his subjection."[38] Here, what Althusser proposes is a structural mechanism of social reproduction: the Subject interpellates individuals into subjects by ideological means, so that they may "freely" fulfill their functional roles and keep social development in order. Given the fact that Althusser personally supported China after the Sino-Soviet split and acquainted himself with Mao's works, this theory can be partly viewed as his conceptual identification with the ideocracy of Red China: Mao serves as the Subject, while Chinese individuals are interpellated into subjects, or "new man" in communist terms, committed to the socialist construction.[39] Essentially, both Althusser and Mao emphasize the autonomy of the superstructure and the potentiality of ideology in the service of social transformation. On the textual level, this agreement can be illustrated by Althusser's 1962 essay "Contradiction and Overdetermination," in which he draws on Mao's dialectic of contradiction to reinterpret the relationship between the infrastructure and the superstructure. Highlighting the political agency of the ISA, Althusser admires Maoism for its ideological

[38] Ibid., 173, 182.

[39] This consistency between Maoism and Althusserianism can be substantiated by the CPC's principle of "mass line" derived from Mao's famous slogan, "from the masses, to the masses": "the Party follows the mass line in its work, doing everything for the masses, relying on them in every task, carrying out the principle of 'from the masses, to the masses,' and translating its correct views into action by the masses of their own accord." ("Constitution of the Communist Party of China," amended and adopted at the Seventeenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China on October 21, 2007)

dominance and practical enterprise. What he looks forward to, in the context of "advanced industrial society," is an ideological war in which the proletarian ISA overwhelms the bourgeois ISA. It is in this sense that Althusser is recognized as a spiritual mentor of both French Maoists and the May 1968 Events in France.

In contrast to Althusser's theoretical engagement with Maoism, Michel Foucault identified with Mao's thought on a practical basis. A former member of the French Communist Party (PCF), Foucault was fascinated by the Cultural Revolution for its spontaneous orientation and populist militancy. Inspired by the Maoist principle of "mass line," Foucault devoted himself to political intervention by founding the Prisons Information Group (GIP), which was aimed at investigating the living conditions of French prisoners and emboldening them to resist the penal system. As an intellectual outcome of this project, his book *Discipline and Punish* delineates how the "gaze of surveillance" institutionalizes individual subjectivity and effectuates an internalization of socially constructed norms. Highlighting the power operation within the panopticon, Foucault reminds us that "our society is not one of spectacle, but of surveillance… We are neither in the amphitheater, nor on the stage, but in the panoptic machine, invested by its effects of power, which we bring to ourselves since we are part of its mechanism."[40] For him, the panopticon symbolizes an authoritarian society in which omnipresent power disciplines individuals and transforms them into conformists in accordance with modern capitalism. As Dosse comments on *Discipline and Punish*, "a veritable critical weapon against disciplinary practices, Foucault's theses became instruments for the various sectorial struggles and the many

[40] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1995), 217.

secondary fronts that were opening and closing. Never had a philosopher so echoed the ideals and discomforts of a generation, that of '68."[41] Indeed, Foucault and the GIP assimilated the Cultural Revolution's rebellious tendency and fought a philosophical battle against the repressive atmosphere of the Fifth Republic. Based on this critique of institutionalization, Foucault further responded to Maoism by revealing the conspiracy between knowledge and power.

Against the grand narrative of the Enlightenment, Foucault recognizes the essence of the movement as a spirit of "critical interrogation":

> The critical ontology of ourselves has to be considered not, certainly, as a theory, a doctrine, nor even as a permanent body of knowledge that is accumulating; it has to be conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them.[42]

For him, the Enlightenment is not a categorical notion, but a critical episteme through the lens of discourse analysis. Basically, Foucault's theory of knowledge not only dissolves social totality on the epistemic level but also demystifies modernity's philosophical foundation, Enlightenment rationalism. Based on this concept of de-essentialization, Foucault further unveils the power structures embedded in the social system of capitalism: in the name of civilization, institutions such as prisons and hospitals function as a coercive apparatus that normalizes people's instinctual dynamism and behavioral pattern. Confronting this systematic oppression, for which he gave the name "biopower," Foucault echoed the Cultural Revolution's slogan of "it is justifiable to rebel" and deconstructed the bourgeoisie's dominant episteme based on the

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[41] François Dosse, *History of Structuralism, Volume 2: The Sign Sets, 1967-Present*, trans. Deborah Glassman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 254.

[42] Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?", in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 50.

Enlightenment rationality. Instead, he proposed an interventional position on social engagement, that is, the "specific intellectual." In contrast to the "universal intellectual," who in effect establishes and consolidates the conspiracy between knowledge and power, the "specific intellectual" tends to focus on the "local knowledge" of marginal groups such as immigrants, women, and homosexuals, in hopes of counterbalancing the hegemonic power in society.[43] Thus, Foucault held similar views to Mao with their belief in populism and anti-intellectualism, given that they both ideologically backed the marginalized and politically questioned modern civilization. Inspired by the activism of the Cultural Revolution, Foucault served as a revolutionary advocate in post-May France and extended Maoism's influence from the sphere of theory to that of practice.

For French intellectuals, the Cultural Revolution, on the one hand, proclaimed a trend for mass campaign against the omnipresence of power, as it meant to Althusser and Foucault; on the other hand, it created an impression that social transformation can be achieved by "cultural" means and that Chinese artists were playing a crucial role in this sensational movement.[44] In this spirit of "art for revolution's sake," French artists dedicated themselves to reflecting modernity by celebrating their aesthetic momentum. Among them, Guy Debord, the founding member of the far-reaching avant-garde group Situationist International, was distinguished for his critique of

[43] The distinction between "universal intellectual" and "specific intellectual" is elaborated by Foucault in an interview conducted by Alessandro Fontana and Pasquale Pasquino. See "Truth and Power," *The Foucault Reader*, 51-75.

[44] This conception historically stemmed from the "eight model plays," which was engineered by Mao's wife Jiang Qing, that dominated the Chinese stage and screens during the Cultural Revolution.

capitalism in his efforts to uphold the Maoist banner of the May revolt, “all power to the imagination.”[45]

Beyond orthodox Marxism’s concept of “commodity fetishism,” Debord holds that the mechanism of contemporary capitalism has been developed into a vision-based “spectacle fetishism.” Above all, he points out an inversion between the spectacle and the reality: “the whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. All that once was directly lived has become mere representation.”[46] Basically, Debord believes that visual spectacle, as a secondary representation in the original sense, has arrogated to itself and signified “a social relationship between people that is mediated by images.”[47] Thus, for him, it is the hegemonic vision that constitutes the core factor to the covert manipulation of bourgeois society: “the spectacle manifests itself as an enormous positivity, out of reach and beyond dispute. All it says is: ‘everything that appears is good; whatever is good will appear.’ The attitude that it demands in principle is the same passive acceptance that it has already secured by means of its seeming incontrovertibility, and indeed by its monopolization of the realm of appearances.”[48] In other words, contemporary capitalism excels at implementing social consensus by means of visual manifestation. With prolonged

[45] The copyright of this slogan belongs to Debord’s fellow situationist Raoul Vaneigem, whose 1967 book *The Revolution of Everyday Life* was highly influential among the May protestors.

[46] Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994), 12.

[47] Ibid.

[48] Ibid., 15.

exposure to the spectacles imbued with dominant ideology, civilians are subjected to the deprivation of their individual diversity, and a homogeneous society composed of the Marcusian "one-dimensional men" is thus actualized. Faced with this Iron Cage of the spectacle, Debord, along with his fellow situationists, responded by creating avant-garde films for the sake of Aesthetic Redemption.

In 1973, Debord released an experimental movie titled *The Society of the Spectacle*, which served as a cinematic interpretation of his 1967 book of the same name. In this work, he presents an assemblage of images including selective footage from feature films such as *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) and *The Shanghai Gesture* (1941), glossy photographs of the early 1970s, and most noticeably, the visual representations of the Soviet Union, Red China, and the May 1968 Events in France. By virtue of montage, Debord subtly juxtaposes the imagery of consumerism with that of radicalism and artistically challenges the hegemonic spectacle of contemporary capitalism. This maneuver, from Martin Jay's perspective, aims "to end the very distinction between art and society in a grand sublation, indeed to overcome the independent realm of culture itself."[49] What Debord intends to do is to launch an aesthetic revolution against the cultural dominance of the bourgeoisie. This rebellious attitude, under the banner of "all power to the imagination," is quintessentially reflected in his visual illustration of the following text from *The Society of the Spectacle:*

> The same history that threatens this twilight world is capable of subjecting space to a directly experienced time. The proletarian revolution is that critique of human geography whereby individuals and communities must construct places and events commensurate with the appropriation, no longer just of their labor, but of their total history. By virtue of the resulting mobile space of play, and by virtue of freely chosen variations in the rules of

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[49] Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-century French Thought* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), 428.

> the game, the independence of places will be rediscovered without any new exclusive tie to the soil, and thus too the authentic journey will be restored to us, along with authentic life understood as a journey containing its whole meaning within itself.[50]

Along with Debord's in-person narration of this paragraph, he deploys a montage to intensify the signification of this fragment. In the wake of showing a scene from *Battleship Potemkin* that features the seamen's preparation for the mutiny, Debord suddenly manifests Pieter Bruegel the Elder's 1563 painting "Tower of Babel" on the screen (Figure 2.3). On the hermeneutic level, this visual performance correlates "the proletarian revolution" in the text with the Tower of Babel in the image. Given that the Tower of Babel biblically refers to the human being's linguistic differentiation and geographical dispersion, this montage, imbued with Debord's avant-garde spirit, artistically declares Situationist International's political ambition: it is imperative for the proletariat to launch an aesthetic revolution against the omnipotent capitalism, so that the aborted project of Babel can be resumed, which metaphorically implies the recovery in interpersonal communication and the restoration of the "authentic journey of life." In this spirit of "all power to the imagination," Debord echoed Maoism by attaching importance to the revolutionary agency of the superstructure, and in particular for him, motion picture. As Vincent Kaufmann comments, "Debord's cinema was strategic. He did not make films to give people something to see but to force his enemies to reveal themselves and to repulse their attacks."[51] Indeed, Debord deemed his movie an artistic weapon for the "cultural war" against the totality of the spectacle. His seminal critique, both in forms of philosophical meditation and cinematic

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[50] Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 126.

[51] Vincent Kaufmann, *Guy Debord: Revolution in the Service of Poetry*, trans. Robert Bononno (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 236.

presentation, not only constituted a converging point where left-wing politics and left-wing aesthetics ideologically met but also paved the way for Marker's and Godard's "revolutionary chinoiserie" in their film productions.

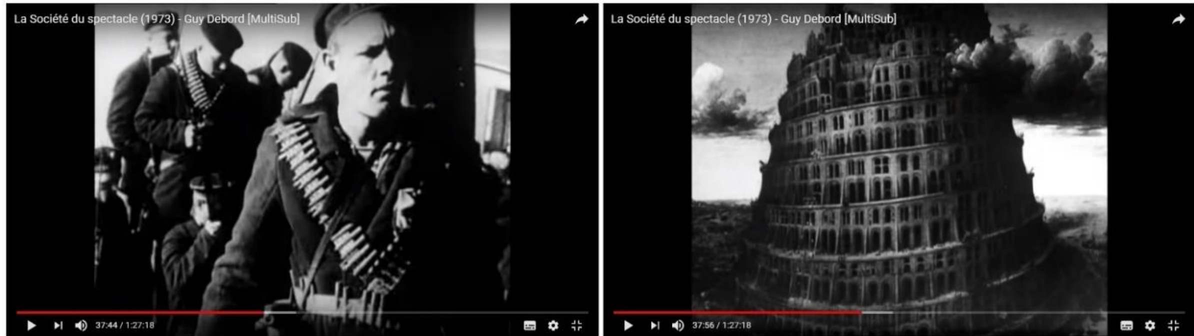

Figure 2.3. "Rebellion – Babel Montage." *La Société du spectacle*, directed by Guy Debord (1973), YouTube.com.

In one way or another, Althusser, Foucault, and Debord were all under the influence of Mao Tse-tung and his provocative thought. In line with Marx and Marcuse in the Western left-wing tradition, these French intellectuals were further inspired by the oriental Maoism and celebrated its revolutionary momentum in the French Counterculture. Before embarking on the "revolutionary chinoiserie," I would like to make a sketch of Mao and his influence on contemporary France. In doing so, my goal is to situate the films in the cultural politics of the May revolt before unfolding their significance on the transnational level.

A highly controversial figure, Mao was of global notability in the twentieth century. As a military strategist, he initiated the remarkable Long March and succeeded in driving Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang from the mainland. As a statesman, he overcame numerous political setbacks and finally became the founder of Red China. As a philosopher, he familiarized himself with Marxism and further developed it into a guide to practice. As an artist, he was recognized as a brilliant poet and calligrapher with his spontaneous personal style. As a supreme leader, he

launched the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, which resulted in tragic losses to Chinese society. As a revolutionary, he aspired to support the oppressed nations' independence movements and exercise leadership in the international communist revolution. All in all, Mao manifested himself as a leftist legend with extraordinary charisma and tremendous dynamism. In China, he was venerated as the "red sun" that benevolently shone upon the people. In Third World countries, he was worshiped as a mentor to facilitate their national liberations. In the West, Mao's image bifurcated for political reasons: while the mainstream deemed him an antagonistic strongman in the Communist Bloc, left-wing activists regarded him as a revolutionary icon whose thought could shed light on their resistance to postwar capitalism. Particularly in France, radical organizations such as the UJC-ML and the PCFML avowed their faith in Maoism and conducted political campaigns based on its guide to practice.[52]

The dissemination of Maoism in France resulted from two main factors. First, since the late 1950s, the PRC had been dedicated to promoting its revolutionary experience to the world. For this purpose, it launched a translation project of Mao's writings and published the French version of *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung* in the mid-1960s. This timely translation offered the French leftists an opportunity to acquaint themselves with Maoism through the firsthand

[52] UJC-ML is the abbreviation for the *Union des jeunesses communistes marxistes-léninistes* (Marxist-Leninist Communist Youth Union). Founded by the excluded members of the *Union des étudiants communistes* (Union of Communist Students, UEC) in 1966, the UJC-ML was a prominent Maoist organization based in Paris at the ENS. Its core members included Robert Linhart, Benny Lévy, and Jacques Broyelle. After the May 1968 events, the UJC-ML dissolved and split into two Maoist groups, *Gauche prolétarienne* (Left Proletarian, GP) and *Vive la revolution* (Long Live the Revolution, VLR). PCFML is the abbreviation for the *Parti communiste marxiste-léniniste de France* (Marxist-Leninist Communist Party of France). Composed of former PCF members who had seceded from the party in the early 1960s, the PCFML disapproved of the USSR's "revisionism" under Khrushchev and received Beijing's official endorsement.

material. Secondly, the public image of the French Communist Party (PCF) was downhill all the way in the postwar period. Besides its disappointing inaction on the Algerian War, the PCF allied itself with the Soviet Union in the early 1960s and thus became "revisionist" in the eyes of Marxist-Leninists. At this point, Mao's works became available in French and immediately captured the French left-wing intellectuals' attention. Regarding the intrinsic connections between Maoism and the May revolt, Richard Wolin generalizes as follows:

> Mao's voluntarism – his belief that revolution depended not on objective conditions but on heroic acts of will – well suited their own youthful insurrectionary exuberance… Mao was widely viewed as a genuine populist who kept the people's interest foremost in mind. His political texts brimmed with praise for the "masses," who possessed an innate revolutionary potential waiting to be tapped by politically enlightened cadres. Last, Mao's notion of "permanent revolution" also resonated among denizens of Paris's Left Bank. It would ensure that, unlike its Soviet counterpart, Chinese communism would not succumb to the heresies of "revisionism."[53]

Primarily, Mao's voluntarism accentuates the significance of fighting spirit and encourages the Parisians to take initiative in their struggle against Gaullism. On the philosophical level, this combative attitude has roots in Mao's influential essay "On Contradiction": "changes in society are due chiefly to the development of the internal contradictions in society, that is, the contradiction between the productive forces and the relations of production, the contradiction between classes and the contradiction between the old and the new; it is the development of these contradictions that pushes society forward and gives the impetus for the supersession of the old society by the new."[54] In this framework, class struggle, in parallel with the growth of

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[53] Wolin, *The Wind from the East: French Intellectuals, the Cultural Revolution, and the Legacy of the 1960s*, 127-28.

[54] Mao Tse-tung, "On Contradiction," in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, *Vol. I* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1965), 314.

productivity, constitutes a significant mechanism that leads to the overall development of society. It was in this consideration that Mao launched the Cultural Revolution to consolidate the communist regime and prevent China's potential "restoration of capitalism." In this light, the May 1968 Events in France appeared to be a transnational derivative of the Cultural Revolution in China, given that they both endeavored to transcend the capitalist mode of production by celebrating the civilian's will to fight. Their difference, however, lies in the fact that the former stemmed from the Parisians' spontaneous motivation, whereas the latter was precipitated by the resolution of an authoritarian leader.

In the second place, Mao's principle of "mass line" found enthusiastic resonance with the May protestors in their resistance to postwar capitalism. Highlighting the mass's pivotal role in the Chinese Revolution, Mao has a profound understanding of the inherent connection between proletarian identity and class struggle: "in place of the utopian 'new man' of the twenty-first century were the 'poor and blank' masses of the present, who moved through history by taking struggle for granted."[55] For him, the proletariat not only possesses a natural desire to fight but also represents an ultimate direction of morality. It is this progressive class consciousness that constitutes the dynamism of historical development. Inspired by this revolutionary populism, the French students and workers were politically mobilized and transformed their rebellious passion into practical campaigns. Under the Maoist banners such as "a revolution is not a dinner party"[56]

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[55] Frederic Wakeman, Jr., *History and Will: Philosophical Perspectives of Mao Tse-tung's Thought* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1973), 73.

[56] Mao Tse-tung, "Investigation of Peasant Movement in Hunan," in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, *Vol. I*, 28.

and “political power grows out of the barrel of a gun,”[57] they confronted the French authorities on the street and resulted in a sensational chaos during the movement. Besides its direct influence on the masses, Mao’s populist tendency also had bearing on French intellectuals like Foucault, as previously discussed, in his investigatory projects aimed at the marginalized. In large part, the Maoist “mass line” compensated the inadequate leadership of the PCF and served as an ideological booster for the May 1968 Events.

Finally, Mao had a fundamentalist belief in communism and called for a “permanent revolution” against the “restoration of capitalism.” On the historical level, this concern was derived from the occurrences of the Poznań protests and the Hungarian uprising in 1956, when Polish and Hungarian dissidents opposed their communist governments and were subsequently suppressed by the USSR. Further stimulated by Khrushchev’s social reform featuring a revival of market economy and a relaxation of commercial culture, Mao began to worry about the sustainability of Chinese communism and initiated a political trend aiming “to combat selfishness and criticize revisionism.” It was in this context that *People’s Daily* propagated Mao’s provocative slogan that transnationally fostered the May revolt: “it is justifiable to rebel.”[58] For Mao, revolution is an ongoing process; it is this perpetual momentum that heralds a thorough transformation of Chinese society. As he expresses in a romantic tone, “poverty gives rise to the desire for change, the desire for action and the desire for revolution. On a blank sheet

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[57] Mao Tse-tung, “Problems of War and Strategy,” in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung, Vol. II* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1965), 224.

[58] Editorial, *People’s Daily* (Beijing), August 23, 1966. It is worth mentioning that this slogan was first pronounced by Mao in his speech, “Talk at Meeting of All Circles in Yenan Celebrating the Sixtieth Birthday of Stalin,” which was delivered on December 21, 1939.

of paper free from any mark, the freshest and most beautiful characters can be written, the freshest and most beautiful pictures can be painted."[59] This romantic idealism, teeming with Mao's poetic charisma, was highly compelling in the milieu of contemporary France. On the one hand, the Cultural Revolution appeared to be a notable alternative to Soviet communism, which had frustrated European leftists for its ossified bureaucracy and coercive diplomacy. On the other hand, the Maoist concept of "permanent revolution" attributed an ideological legitimacy to the Parisians, so that they voluntarily carried out a struggle against the "advanced industrial society" by following their fanatic counterparts in China – the Red Guards.

As Frederic Wakeman, Jr. indicates, there was a three-fold image of Mao in modern history: "the historical revolutionary whose past exploits inspired present action, the current chairman – red sun to all – whose person was… a living presence rather than a living exemplar, and the persona expressed by his thought."[60] While being an authoritarian leader who dominated Chinese politics, Mao served as a virtual mentor for Western leftists and exerted an impact through his radical thought on the French Counterculture. Beyond the political level, Maoism also extended its influence into the world of art and actualized a cinematic trend to which I give the name "revolutionary chinoiserie." In the next two sections, I will examine the Maoist image in contemporary French film. In considering movies by Marker and Godard, my goal is to highlight their works' representation of Chinese communism and further reveal their ideological significance in the context of contemporary France.

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[59] Mao Tse-tung, *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung* (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1966), 36.

[60] Wakeman, Jr., *History and Will: Philosophical Perspectives of Mao Tse-tung's Thought*, 23.

2.3. From an Imperial to a Revolutionary Capital: Chris Marker's Phenomenology of Beijing

Historically, Western leftist filmmakers' portrait of Red China dated from the New Wave in 1950s France. Composed of groups such as *Cahiers du cinéma* and the Left Bank,[61] the New Wave was a sensational trend featuring its avant-garde spirit on both aesthetic and political levels. In the trajectory of left-wing film, it was indebted to Italian neorealism, which, as I have pointed out in Chapter One, endeavored to manifest a deeper sense of reality and awaken the proletariat's class consciousness. Carrying forward this realist spirit, the New Wave directors criticized the Tradition of Quality[62] flourishing at that time and advocated an innovative cinematography that aims "to shoot as quickly as possible with portable equipment, sacrificing the control and glamour of mainstream productions for a lively, modern look and sound that owed more to documentary and television shooting methods than to mainstream, commercial cinema."[63] To some degree, it was this "artificial amateurishness" that afforded New Wave films an exceptional sense of veracity.

On the theoretical level, the New Wave was nourished by André Bazin, the founding editor of the film magazine *Cahiers du cinéma*. Among the expressive elements of film, Bazin

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[61] Originating from the film magazine of the same name, the school of *Cahiers du cinéma* was founded by the renowned film theorist André Bazin and included directors such as François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, and Éric Rohmer. Associated with *Cahiers*, the Left Bank filmmakers, represented by Chris Marker, Alain Resnais, and Agnès Varda, were older in age and manifested a milder progressiveness in aesthetics.

[62] Highly popular in postwar French filmdom, the Tradition of Quality was a cinematic trend that stressed the established conventions of film on both thematic and technical levels.

[63] Neupert, *A History of the French New Wave Cinema*, xvii.

especially recognizes the incorporation of temporality: “[film] makes a molding of the object as it exists in time and, furthermore, makes an imprint of the duration of the object.”[64] Indeed, the movie camera initiates a temporal dimension of vision and facilitates cinema to reconstruct reality on a holistic level. On the basis of these concepts, Bazin sets the tone of his film theory: “cinema [is] the asymptote of reality.”[65] This statement vividly indicates the phenomenality of cinematic representation. Specifically, motion picture transcends the physical appearance of things and enables a dynamic revelation of the world. It is in this process that the signification of film takes place and the audience is given the opportunity to experience an alternative sense of reality. In Bazin’s framework, this phenomenological quality further engenders a political agency of film. As Robert Stam summarizes, “cinema becomes a sacrament; an altar where a kind of transubstantiation takes place… this in-depth conception was linked for Bazin to a political notion of the democratization of filmic perception, in that the spectator enjoyed the freedom to scan the multi-planar field of the image for its meaning.”[66] In other words, filmic image invites spectators to formulate their own visualizations and thus actualizes an “aesthetic democracy” in the cinema. In response to Benjamin’s ambivalence, Bazin’s theory downplays the problematic effect of indoctrination and gives prominence to the revolutionary potentiality of film. Under its influence, the New Wave directors dramatized their leftist sentiments. Among them, Chris Marker and Jean-Luc Godard distinguished themselves for their unique movies about Red China.

[64] André Bazin, “Theater and Cinema,” in *What Is Cinema? Vol. 1*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004), 97.

[65] André Bazin, “Umberto D: A Great Work,” in *What Is Cinema? Vol. 2*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004), 82.

[66] Stam, *Film Theory: An Introduction*, 76-77.

Associated with both the Left Bank and *Cahiers du cinéma*, Marker is one of the most eminent documentary filmmakers in history. For film critics, his "essay film" is unique for its self-reflective and self-referential style and arguably contains "highly individual and quirky intelligence – one that is Marxist and humanistic in its orientation but also cool, sardonic, and intolerant of received opinions."[67] Throughout his career, Marker showed a distinct inclination toward left-wing culture and devoted himself to the representation of Third World socialism. This progressive tendency is especially reflected in his founding of SLON,[68] a film cooperative committed to creating proletariat film in collaboration with industrial works, and his production of *A Grin Without a Cat* (1977), an ambitious movie examining the net effect of the twentieth-century socialist movement. Prior to these efforts, Marker traveled to China in 1955, six years after the establishment of the nascent People's Republic, and shot a 19-minute documentary entitled *Sunday in Peking* (1956).[69] Historically, this film not only constituted the first movie that he produced independently but also marked the starting point of my research object, Red China through the lens of Western leftist filmmakers.

In terms of style, *Sunday in Peking* quintessentially illustrates Marker's "essay film" cinematography. Rather than formulating a consistent narrative, the director deploys his "camera-

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[67] John Wakeman, ed., *World Film Directors, Vol. 2* (New York: H. W. Wilson, 1988), 650.

[68] SLON stands for *Société pour le lancement des oeuvres nouvelles* ("Society for Launching New Works").

[69] Spanning September to November 1955, this group visit was proposed by the French poet Claude Roy and organized by the Franco-Chinese Friendship League. Besides Marker, the delegation also includes Sartre and Beauvoir, whose accounts of Red China were covered in the first section.

pen" to make a sketch of Beijing on a chronological basis.[70] Focusing on Beijing's urban landscape, *Sunday in Peking* evinces a conspicuous sense of temporality. The city's past, present, and future are subtly embedded in the spatial exploration of the camera, and the movie thus manifests itself as a phenomenological representation of China's revolutionary capital.

At the onset of the film, Marker sets up a contrast between his juvenile fantasy about Beijing and his actual coming to the city in 1955. Starting with a spinning windmill that symbolizes childhood, the vision moves on to a cluster of handicrafts with distinct Chinese characteristics (Figure 2.4). As the camera shifts up, this image of chinoiserie is abruptly terminated, followed by a juxtaposition of the windmill and the Eiffel Tower (Figure 2.5).

Figure 2.4. "Colorful Handicrafts with Chinese Characteristics." *Sunday in Peking*, directed by Chris Marker (1956), Dafilms.com. (left)
Figure 2.5. "Juxtaposition of Windmill and the Eiffel Tower." *Sunday in Peking*. (right)

Through this series of shots, the director visualizes his in-Paris imagination of China, an exotic land teeming with innocence and color. Next, Marker proclaims his arrival at Beijing by

[70] A concept in favor of auteurism, "camera-pen" was coined by the French film critic Alexandre Astruc to promote the idea that filmmakers should wield movie cameras in the way that writers use their pens.

"stepping into a picture belonging to his childhood."[71] In the wake of a book illustration featuring the Sacred Way leading to the Ming Tombs (Figure 2.6), the vision redirects the audience to the very same landscape in the real world (Figure 2.7). It is through this montage that the director achieves a phenomenological transition of the film: the image of a path not only indicates the entrance of a historic sight but also signifies a conversion from fantasy to reality. This intent is even more pronounced in consideration that Marker, for the sake of contrast, displays the illustration at an angle while exhibiting a horizontal representation of the real. Moreover, this image of a path can also be viewed as an allusion to the Chinese philosophical idea of Tao/Dao, which has a dualistic meaning of "way" and "speak." By presenting the Sacred Way, the director thus concludes his fantasy about Beijing and sets forth his cinematic discourse about the city. To some degree, this path symbolizes a phenomenological access to the temporality of Beijing. Through his documentary lens, Marker invites the audience to demystify the city at the intersection of historical heritage and revolutionary lineament.

Figure 2.6. "Book Illustration Featuring the Path to the Ming Tombs." *Sunday in Peking*. (left)
Figure 2.7. "Path to the Ming Tombs in 1955." *Sunday in Peking*. (right)

[71] *Sunday in Peking*, directed by Chris Marker (1956), Dafilms.com.

Marker's portrait of Beijing starts with a misty dawn. An ordinary weather for the resident, mist seems to serve as an embellishment for our newly arrived director: "the secret of the tombs was one form of the Chinese politeness, and the mist is perhaps another. This filmy veil that comes between people prevents them from touching each other or staring at each other. This city at the bottom of the sea, this dusty light midway between water and silk, all these are still politeness, but it is already a form of painting."[72] For him, the mistiness of Beijing not only embodies moral advantage but also actualizes an unusual vista comparable to impressionist painting. It is not hard to see that Marker has a favorable presumption of China and lays a positive keynote for his subsequent investigation.

As the morning proceeds, the urban landscape of Beijing continues to unfold. After explaining the protective function of a man's mask, Marker makes further comments in a playful tone: "the revolution was directed against the capitalists but also against dust, disease, and flies. The result is that one still finds capitalists in China, but there are no more flies."[73] This observation aroused unexpected criticism at the Berlin International Film Festival in 1957. Seemingly a ridicule of the Chinese revolution, this utterance was taken as communist propaganda by the jury and was asked to be removed from screening.[74] In the atmosphere of the Cold War, this anecdote heralded Western leftist filmmakers' political awkwardness caught up between the Eastern and Western blocs: on the Chinese side, they appeared as Europeans with cultural superiority in spite of their left-wing inclination; on the Western side, they were

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[72] *Sunday in Peking.*

[73] Ibid.

[74] Lupton, *Chris Marker: Memories of the Future*, 52.

considered to be collaborators of communism who “betrayed” their mainstream civilization. After Marker’s *Sunday in Peking*, Antonioni and Ivens also encountered similar predicaments with their productions of *Chung Kuo* (1972) and *How Yukong Moved the Mountains* (1976). This moral dilemma, on the one hand, stemmed from the divergence between left-wing politics and left-wing aesthetics; on the other hand, it was philosophically rooted in the ethical dynamism of self and other.

Figure 2.8. “Children on Their Way to School.” *Sunday in Peking*. (left)
Figure 2.9. “Young Athletes Doing Exercise.” *Sunday in Peking*. (right)

Later in the morning, Marker comes across a group of children on their way to school. Inspired by their innocent faces, he shows his faith in the prospect of China: “on its way to a future without capitalists, disease, and flies, here is the China of tomorrow, the China which gives me a cheerful greeting” (Figure 2.8).[75] In his subsequent visit to the Beihai Park, Marker witnesses more Chinese youngsters playing in the field and doing exercise (Figure 2.9). Highlighting their fitness and vitality, the director recognizes the improvement of Chinese children’s living conditions and pins hopes on the futural dimension of China. In a way, these

[75] *Sunday in Peking.*

scenes serve as the visual illustrations of Mao's famous speech: "the world is yours, as well as ours, but in the last analysis, it is yours. You young people, full of vigor and vitality, are in the bloom of life, like the sun at eight or nine in the morning. Our hope is placed on you. The world belongs to you. China's future belongs to you."[76] In this light, the "morning suns" under the morning sun constitutes a metaphorical manifestation in support of Red China. What Marker displays, through his portrait of Chinese youth, is nothing but his leftist sentiment toward a brighter future of the world.

Figure 2.10. "Old Town of Beijing." *Sunday in Peking*. (left)
Figure 2.11. "Eclectic Architecture in the New Town of Beijing." *Sunday in Peking*. (right)

In his following exploration of Beijing, Marker uses his camera to reveal the temporality embedded in the city's urban landscape. In search of a "new China" under the banner of communism, he is delighted to see the disappearance of the stereotypical "China of the movies" in which "Humphrey Bogart in a white suit [comes] out of an opium den" (Figure 2.10).[77] From a progressive perspective, the director further concludes that "the price of modernism does not

[76] Mao Tse-tung, *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung*, 288.

[77] *Sunday in Peking.*

seem so high when we see the harsh price of the picturesque."[78] In favor of China's primordial modernization, Marker approves of the "Beijing of 2000 AD" under construction and highly regards its new architecture in a combination of antiquity and modernity[79] (Figure 2.11). On the phenomenological level, this image of eclecticism manifests the temporality of the city: the traditional roof symbolizes Beijing's past as the imperial capital of China, and the mannerist façade shows the city's present inclusiveness of Western culture. What the director anticipates, in the face of this hybridity, is a Chinese future that transcends the synthesis of the past and the present and actualizes an unprecedented mode of civilization.

With the advent of afternoon, Marker continues his exploration with an emphasis on the colorfulness of Beijing. Similar to the historical chinoiserie, which wields color to accentuate the exoticism of China, Marker immerses himself in a "feast of color" with Chinese flavors and highlights the city's abundance of liveliness. Specifically, the various fruits and miscellaneous toys illustrate the material affluence of Beijing, while the exquisite costume and fine porcelains represent the city's richness on the spiritual level. After this chromatic survey on the street, the vision is switched to the Forbidden City, where the royal colors of red and yellow dominate the screen. Inspired by the palace's glorious majesty, Marker gasps in admiration: "this is no longer the 'China of the movies,' it is the China of Jules Verne, of Marco Polo… One dreams of a fabulous China with the past more remote than the concealed face of the moon, revealed only by

[78] Ibid.

[79] Ibid.

the roosters crowing in the night and the sheen lions staring at the sun."[80] Beyond this romantic portrait of chinoiserie, the director infuses a temporal dimension into his representation of the Forbidden City by means of two montages.

Figure 2.12. "Middle-aged Man Carrying His Daughter." *Sunday in Peking*. (left)
Figure 2.13. "Bronze Statue of the Turtle-like Dragon." *Sunday in Peking*. (middle)
Figure 2.14. "Little Girl Looking up at the Camera." *Sunday in Peking*. (right)

In succession, Marker presents a middle-aged man climbing stairs with his daughter on his back (Figure 2.12), a bronze statue of the turtle-like dragon (Figure 2.13),[81] and another little girl standing on the ground and looking up at the camera (Figure 2.14). Among these three scenes, two montages stand out for their exceptional agency of signification. To begin with, the first image can be viewed as an illustration of the Chinese traditional lineage: from generation to generation, Chinese people maintained their cultural lineage on a dependent basis, symbolized by the daughter's being borne by her father. In consideration of the girl's female identity and the background of a royal palace, it can be further interpreted that Marker is alluding to the fact that Chinese people's individuality was historically subjected to the patriarchal and monarchical powers and is now about to free itself. This import is subsequently visualized in the next two

[80] Ibid. To explain, Marker's mentioning of Jules Verne originates from the latter's 1879 adventure novel *Tribulations of a Chinaman in China*.

[81] In Chinese mythology, this turtle-like zoomorphism, with the name of 赑屃, is one of the nine sons of the dragon.

scenes: the laden father is cinematically "petrified" into a turtle-like dragon, which symbolizes the burden of Chinese tradition, and another little girl is shown to stand on the ground by herself, without the grand palaces as the background.

On the hermeneutic level, these two montages subtly celebrate China's extrication from antiquity and the Chinese people's acquisition of national independence and personal freedom in the sheer fact that a girl can wander in the imperial palace, forbidden to all except the royal family in the recent past. In a way, they constitute a visual performance of Mao's notable declaration made at the First Plenary Session of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference: "the Chinese people, comprising one quarter of humanity, have now stood up!"[82] Through his documentary lens, Marker thus accomplishes a phenomenological reflection on the temporality of China. Located in the Forbidden City, the Chinese past, present, and future are fused in what Stam calls "cinematic altar," and the audience is given an opportunity to envisage an ascending nation combined with historical heritage and nascent vitality.

In the latter half of *Sunday in Peking*, Marker further correlates the temporality of Beijing with the revolutionary momentum of Chinese communism. After an introduction to the major themes in Peking Opera and *ombres chinoises*, he deploys a montage transitioning from the image of a shadow-puppet ancient general with his battle steed (Figure 2.15) to that of the military parade of the PRC's tenth anniversary celebrations (Figure 2.16). In the meantime, the director comments on this series of scenes through voice-over: "ancestors of all those generals over two thousand years made and destroyed China, until one 1st of October the Chinese people

[82] Mao Tse-tung, "The Chinese People Have Stood up!", in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, *Vol. V* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1965), 16.

celebrated their Bastille Day, their day of revolution."[83] In combination of vision and sound, Marker passes a historical comment: the communist revolution has emancipated China from the cyclical pattern of history, and the country is now marching toward a progressive future valiantly and spiritedly. Here, what we see through the camera lens is how the director harnesses cinematic phenomenology and embeds his left-wing sentiment in his portrait of Chinese communism. This politicization by aesthetic means culminates at the end of the film when Marker contextualizes his exploration of Beijing in the postwar global situation.

Figure 2.15. "Shadow-puppet Ancient General with His Battle Steed." *Sunday in Peking*. (left)
Figure 2.16. "Military Parade of the PRC's Tenth Anniversary Celebrations." *Sunday in Peking*. (right)

After the clip of the National Day ceremony, Marker enunciates the ethical impetus to his production of *Sunday in Peking*: "so long shut away behind these symbols, China is not called upon to reveal itself. And we are required to understand these sensitive faces – these men, these women, these children – with whom we shall have to share history as we shall have to share our daily bread."[84] On the one hand, Marker is interested in traditional Chinese culture because of

[83] *Sunday in Peking.*

[84] Ibid.

his childhood fantasies; on the other hand, his leftist standpoint motivates him to show solicitude for the other and further seek an alterity that may complement the downside of the Western world. At this junction of nostalgia and inspiration, the director concludes the film in the scenario of the Summer Palace: "all this is as remote as China and as familiar as Hyde Park. Against this background of past splendor, in the avenues of this Mongol Versailles, one wonders about both past and future. But from my part as I look at these scenes… I just wonder the close of this Sabbath day in Peking: whether China itself is not the Sabbath of the whole world."[85] In this summary, Marker reveals the philosophical underpinning of *Sunday in Peking*, that is, the ethics of self and other, the temporality of past, present, and future, and the concept of China as a revolutionary utopia for the West. As a leftist filmmaker, he pins hopes on the future of China and yearns for a transcendental other through his documentary lens. What he presents to the audience is a phenomenology of Beijing as both an imperial and a revolutionary capital.

2.4. Maoism in Performance: *La Chinoise* and Godard's Cinematic Revolution

In contrast to Marker's deployment of documentary film, Jean-Luc Godard celebrated Brechtian performativity in his fictional portrayal of Chinese communism. In this section, I will examine Godard's cinematic Maoism by focusing on his 1967 work *La Chinoise*. Produced on the eve of the May revolt, this film, along with Godard's later political movies such as *The Wind from the East* (1969) and *Tout va bien* (1972), is not only radical in ideology but also avant-garde on the technical level.

Among the Young Turks of *Cahiers du cinéma*, Godard is distinguished for his strategy of dysnarration. Epitomized by his masterpiece *Breathless* (1960), this avant-garde

[85] Ibid.

cinematography "emphasizes the arbitrariness of story construction, creates permanent complexity and ambiguity, and calls the viewer's attention abruptly to the labor of signification."[86] Under the influence of Brecht, Godard aspired to challenge the audience's aesthetic norm and devoted himself to a cinematic revolution along with his New-Wave fellows such as François Truffaut and Éric Rohmer. For Godard, film is not only a modality of self-expression but also a performative conduct aimed at social intervention. It was out of this political impulse that he massively deployed the Brechtian device of alienation effect in his productions during the French Counterculture.

Inspired by the Chinese elements prevalent in Paris of the 1960s, Godard made *La Chinoise* to fathom the "revolutionary chinoiserie" in contemporary France and showcase his Maoist stance by artistic means. Adapted from Dostoyevsky's 1872 novel *The Possessed*, *La Chinoise* has a loose and simple plot: Véronique, a college student and daughter of a banker, initiates a Maoist group called Aden Arabie Cell, which commemorates the French leftist writer Paul Nizan's influential essay "Aden Arabie" (1931). Located in an apartment, she and her boyfriend Guillaume, as well as other adherents Yvonne, Henri, and Kirilov,[87] engage in a series of political debates concerning a wide range of topics such as Stalinism, the Cultural Revolution, and the Vietnam War. Eventually, Henri is expelled from the group due to his empathy for the "Soviet revisionism," and Véronique becomes a radical activist and attempts to murder Mikhail

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[86] Neupert, *A History of the French New Wave Cinema*, 218-19.

[87] Kirilov is the only name of a character that Godard adopted from Dostoyevsky's *The Possessed*. It is also worth mentioning that both characters in the name of Kirilov wind up with insanity and commit suicide.

Sholokhov, the USSR's Minister of Culture, during his diplomatic visit to France.[88] After this botched assassination, the movie ends up with Véronique's prophetic monologue: "The end of summer meant back to school to me – a struggle for me and some comrades. On the other hand, I was wrong: I thought I'd made a leap forward, and I realized I'd made only the first timid step of a long march."[89] Indeed, several months after the completion of *La Chinoise*, the Parisian students and workers poured into the streets and launched the sensational May 1968 Events in France. In a way, *La Chinoise* constituted an artistic prophecy and manifested itself as a hybridity of fiction and history. Among the works of Red China through the lens of Western leftist filmmakers, *La Chinoise* distinguished itself not only for its characteristic cinematography but also for its historical significance in the context of the May revolt.

La Chinoise evinces a theatrical quality teeming with the Brechtian dramaturgy of alienation. Enclosed in an apartment, the vision frequently self-deconstructs its representationality, so that the spectators are hindered from identifying themselves with the image on the screen. As a primary strategy, Godard tends to situate the scene in a room painted in the French Tricolor (Figure 2.17). This maneuver, with a distinct sense of mise-en-scène, visually accomplishes a politicization of the film: under the banner of the French Revolution, the characters are carrying out progressive undertakings in the context of contemporary capitalism.

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[88] In history, Mikhail Sholokhov was a Soviet novelist whose magnum opus, *And Quiet Flows the Don* (1940), earned him the 1965 Nobel Prize in Literature. In the post-Stalin era, Sholokhov endorsed the Zhdanovian cultural autocracy and criticized the Soviet writers in exile. It was on this matter that Godard sarcastically dramatized him in *La Chinoise* even though Sholokhov never held public office in the Soviet Ministry of Culture.

[89] *La Chinoise*, directed by Jean-Luc Godard (1967), Kanopystreaming.com. It is worth mentioning that this quote contains two insinuations related to Chinese communism: The Great Leap Forward and the Long March.

This alienating image, featuring Godard's iconic juxtaposition of blue, white, and red, not only constitutes a cinematic spectacle but also entails the audience's critical investigation into the reality of the moment. Moreover, this Brechtian cinematography is further enhanced by the verbal performance that Godard draws from the "big-character poster" of the Cultural Revolution.[90] For instances, two slogans manifest themselves in Figures 2.17 and 2.18: "we should replace vague ideas with clear images" and "a minority with the right ideas is not a minority." These "writings on the wall," on the one hand, function as "verbal intruders" that prevent the spectators from immersing themselves in the movie; on the other hand, they serve as ideological stimulators conducive to the spreading of revolutionary thought.

Figure 2.17. "Tricolor Mise-en-scène with Slogan, 'We Should Replace Vague Ideas with Clear Images.'" *La Chinoise*, directed by Jean-Luc Godard (1967), Kanopystreaming.com. (left)
Figure 2.18. "Tricolor Mise-en-scène with Slogan, 'A Minority with the Right Ideas Is Not a Minority.'" *La Chinoise*. (right)

Beyond the level of scenery, *La Chinoise*'s Brechtianism is also evidenced by its deployments of "breaking the fourth wall" and self-reflexive filming. These two maneuvers are condensed in Guillaume's remarkable monologue in which he celebrates his revolutionary sentiment on a performative basis. In the beginning of this scene, Godard sets a contrast between

[90] The "big-character poster" is a hand-written placard used for political commentary during the Cultural Revolution. It usually conveys polemical information in contrast to mainstream ideology.

Guillaume’s eloquent speech and Véronique’s absence of mind (Figure 2.19),[91] followed by an extensive monodrama that Guillaume delivers solely to the audience. In doing so, the director subtly breaks the Brechtian “fourth wall,” the silver screen in this case, and deconstructs the theatrical coherence of the movie. This strategy, on the one hand, enthuses the spectators for their virtual interaction with the protagonist; on the other hand, it actualizes an ideological transmission to the audience in terms of radical thought. Furthermore, Godard, as the on-site director, deliberately interferes with Guillaume’s monologue and redirects the topic to the relationship between acting and revolution. Distracted by this meta-cinematic maneuver, Guillaume initiates a dialogue with the crew and resets the film into a self-reflexive mode.

Figure 2.19. “Guillaume’s Flow of Eloquence and Véronique’s Absence of Mind.” *La Chinoise*.

As the sequence starts, Guillaume tells a story to illuminate the concept of “revolutionary performativity”: some Chinese students demonstrated in Moscow and were repressed by the Soviet authorities. In front of the Western media, one student, whose face was covered with bandages, condemned the USSR for its atrocity with strong emotions. After a wave of photography, he removed his bandages, and it turned out that his face was intact, rather than injured, as expected (Figure 2.20). In response to the reporters’ censure of deception, Guillaume

[91] This contrast is further intensified by the disparate backgrounds of the two images.

defends the Chinese student: “it was theater, real theater – reflection on reality… like Brecht or Shakespeare.”[92] Here, what Guillaume argues reveals Godard’s own opinion on the political agency of dramaturgy: “we are Marxists or Maoists, what’s important is the social use of technique, not technique per se.”[93] For Godard, the significance of performance lies in its effect of agitation, or, in Brecht’s words, “writing from the standpoint of the class which offers the broadest solutions for the pressing difficulties in which human society is caught up.”[94] With Guillaume’s illustration of Brechtianism, Godard not only articulates his radical thought but also precludes the spectators from identifying themselves with the plot. It is this meta-theatrical technique that constitutes a performative joint where left-wing politics and left-wing aesthetics intertwine.

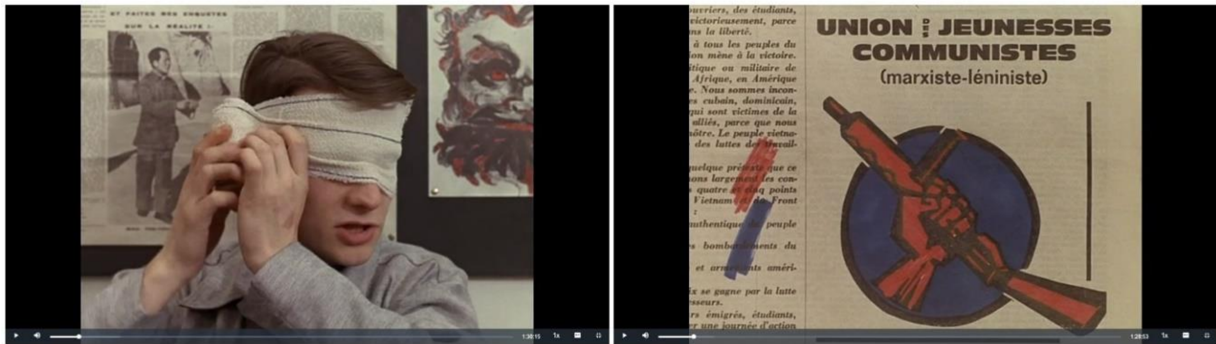

Figure 2.20. “Guillaume’s Performative Storytelling.” *La Chinoise*. (left)
Figure 2.21. “Image of UJC-ML.” *La Chinoise*. (right)

In the wake of an interruptive image of UJC-ML (Figure 2.21), Guillaume pronounces his rebellious tendency: “we must be different from our parents. My father fought the Germans hard

[92] *La Chinoise.*

[93] David Sterritt, ed., *Jean-Luc Godard: Interviews* (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 1998), 68.

[94] Brecht, “Against Georg Lukács,” 82.

in the war. Now he runs a Club Med resort, a big holiday camp by the sea. What's terrible is, he doesn't realize that it's made exactly along the lines of the concentration camps."[95] Through this passage, Godard brings to light the psychological basis for the May revolt, that is, French youth's oedipal rebellion derived from the banality of post-war consumerism. Thereafter, the director initiates a conversation with Guillaume, and the movie is thus reset into an interactive mode. When asked about the significance of Maoism, the protagonist replies: "yes, Mao's ideas can help me. In any case, you need sincerity and violence."[96] In what follows, Guillaume further smashes the "fourth wall" on the discursive level: "you're getting a kick out of this. Like, I'm joking for the film, because of all the technicians here. But that's not it. It's not because of a camera…."[97] At this point, the vision manifests Godard's operation of the camera in the tricolor mise-en-scène (Figure 2.22). This self-reflection of the filmmaker, on the one hand, persists with the director's Brechtian dramaturgy; on the other hand, it arouses a visual ecstasy consistent with the rebellious spirit of Maoism.

Figure 2.22. "Godard's Operation of the Camera." *La Chinoise*. (left)
Figure 2.23. "Guillaume's Turning Around." *La Chinoise*. (right)

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[95] *La Chinoise.*

[96] Ibid.

[97] Ibid.

Moreover, Guillaume highly regards the revolutionized Beijing Opera in China and envisions its European counterpart: “there’s a great Althusserian text about a Brecht play, and I’ve made it mine. I turn around….”[98] At this moment, he physically turns around and sets his eyes on an image of Mao, which has been serving as the background all along (Figure 2.23). To its right, a picture distinguishes itself for its hybridity of Karl Marx’s portrait and the Chinese ink-and-wash painting. “And suddenly the question is…” Guillaume proceeds, “part of a greater play continuing through me… a worker in the world theater. The sense incomplete… looking through and with me… all the actors and settings of the silent oration.”[99] This series of performance not only draws lessons from Brecht’s didactic plays but also reveals Godard’s fascination with Maoism. In a way, what Guillaume stares at is not so much a political figure as an objective correlative of the director’s progressive sentiment. And the bizarre picture, as a performative element of “revolutionary chinoiserie,” can be viewed as a confluence of left-wing politics and left-wing aesthetics on the iconic level.

Figure 2.24. “Kirilov Mending a Handlebar.” *La Chinoise*. (left)
Figure 2.25. “Yvonne Polishing Shoes.” *La Chinoise*. (right)

[98] Ibid.

[99] Ibid.

In the remaining sections of *La Chinoise*, Godard practices the Brechtian alienation with a few more examples. In the scene of Henri's lecture on Marxism-Leninism, Kirilov and Yvonne, both born of the least well-to-do families, deconstruct the visual coherence by conducting proletarian behaviors such as mending a handlebar (Figure 2.24) and polishing shoes (Figure 2.25). On the ideological level, these visions illustrate Mao's idea of "combining young intellectuals with the masses of workers and peasants" and manifest themselves as Living Newspapers in support of Maoism.[100]

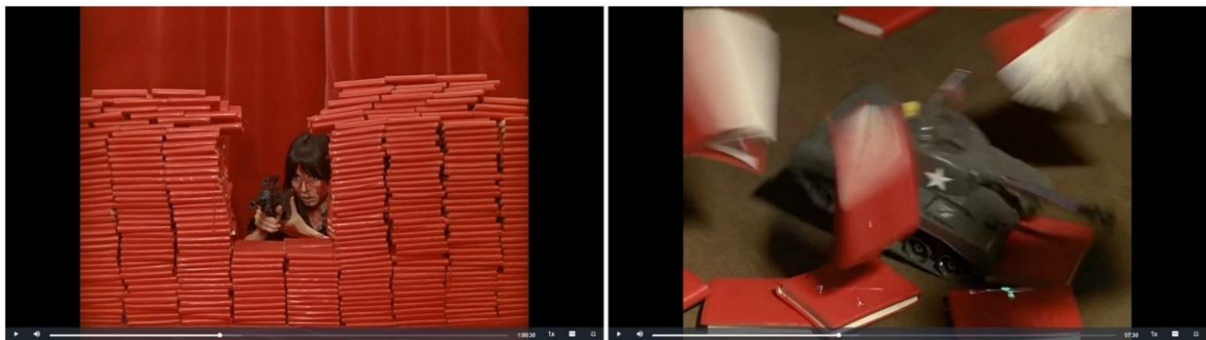

Figure 2.26. "Yvonne's Defense Covered by Little Red Books." *La Chinoise*. (left)
Figure 2.27. "Little Red Books Being Thrown at American Tanks." *La Chinoise*. (right)

Moreover, the mise-en-scène is positioned with a pile of Mao's Little Red Books, which appear as material embodiments of Aden Arabie Cell's guiding ideology. As an alienating installation, this bookstall is also featured in the section of the group's mock Vietnamese War. On the one hand, the copies of Little Red Books constitute an "intrenchment" for Yvonne's "defense" on the Vietnamese side (Figure 2.26); on the other hand, they are used as "weapons of

[100] In his 1939 speech commemorating the 20th anniversary of the May Fourth Movement, Mao proposed a criterion for "revolutionary youth," that is, "whether or not he is willing to integrate himself with the broad masses of workers and peasants and does so in practice." ("Orientation of Youth Movement," in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, *Vol. II*, 246) During the Cultural Revolution, this principle was further developed into the Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside Movement, which historically relocated 17 million youth to rural areas for the sake of "reeducation."

criticism" in a symbolistic attack on "American tanks" (Figure 2.27). Teeming with visual performativity, these maneuvers not only fascinate the audience with their uncanny representation but also give prominence to Mao and his radical thought in the context of 1967 France.

Regarding the theme of *La Chinoise*, Godard explains from the perspective of cinema in relation to reality:

> … the real subject is not *La Chinoise*. It's a movie doing itself which is called *La Chinoise*. It's both together. The subject is not only the actors but the artistic way of showing them. Both together. They are not separate. There is a quote in *La Chinoise* which I would like to say. The young painter says, "art is not a reflection of reality. It's the reality of reflection." To me it means something. Art is not only a mirror. There is not only the reality and then the mirror-camera… You can't distinguish them so clearly. I think the movie is not a thing which is taken by the camera; the movie is the reality of the movie moving from reality to the camera. It's between them.[101]

In this statement, Godard advocates a spontaneous cinematography and considers *La Chinoise* as a dynamic rendition of reality, exemplified by the above-discussed scenes featuring distinct performativity. For him, film exerts influence on society not only as a reflective mirror but also as an investigatory agency. It is through the celebration of alienating performance that cinema actualizes an alternative sense of reality, and the spectators are given an opportunity to transcend their bourgeois mindset and experience a cinematic epiphany of revolution. Inspired by Brechtianism on the aesthetic level, this practical tendency is also inseparable from Godard's progressive ideologies of Marxism-Leninism and, particularly on the eve of the May revolt, Maoism. As he acknowledges, "I just heard of someone named Mao who seemed to me to be

[101] Sterritt, ed., *Jean-Luc Godard: Interviews*, 29.

part of the New Wave. He said things differently and the few of his texts that I read, very few, made me work to think in a way that no other political texts ever did."[102]

Dissatisfied with the film industry of Hollywood, Godard, along with his comrade Jean-Pierre Gorin, founded the Dziga Vertov Group in 1968, and they dedicated themselves to the enterprise of proletarian movies. In line with *La Chinoise*, they collaborated on a few more radical films such as *The Wind from the East* (1969), *British Sounds* (1970), and *Tout va bien* (1972) during the post-May era. Among them, *Tout va bien* served as another work relevant to Maoism, given that it presented a Brechtian reflection on Mao's political guideline of autogestion, namely self-management by the workers. Regarding the Maoist image in contemporary France, Kristin Ross summarizes as follows: "French Maoism was perhaps less about China than it was about the formation of a set of political desires filtered through a largely imagined China, a filtering that allowed a synthesis of a profoundly French utopian tradition for a new generation."[103] Indeed, Maoism in France was not so much a representation of Chinese communism as a manifestation of French intellectuals' utopianism in the spirit of the Cultural Revolution. For filmmakers like Godard, Mao served as an ideological icon whose thought might not only stimulate Western audiences' progressive consciousness but also "cure" the problematic totality of contemporary capitalism.

From Marker's *Sunday in Peking* to Godard's cinematic Maoism, what we have encountered is a collection of "revolutionary chinoiserie" rooted in the zeitgeist of French

[102] MacCabe, *Godard: Images, Sounds, Politics*, 76.

[103] Kristin Ross, *May '68 and Its Afterlives* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 97.

Counterculture. During the 1970s, this trend was carried on by another two European film maestros, Michelangelo Antonioni and Joris Ivens, with their documentaries on China titled *Chung Kuo* (1972) and *How Yukong Moved the Mountains* (1976), respectively. In the next two chapters, I will focus on these two movies, with the purpose of unraveling their significations between left-wing politics and left-wing aesthetics.

CHAPTER 3

ANTONIONI'S *CHUNG KUO* AS AN EVENT:

HOW A LOVER OF RED CHINA CAN BE (MIS)UNDERSTOOD

In 1971, the fifth year of the Cultural Revolution, Radio Television Italiana (RAI) asked the Chinese authorities to allow Michelangelo Antonioni to shoot a documentary about Red China. This proposal was soon approved for two reasons. First, the Chinese government was eager to improve its relationship with the West because of its recent conflict with the Soviet Union.[1] Secondly, Antonioni's reputation as a left-wing director made the CPC believe that he would present a positive image of China to Western audiences.[2] In response to the invitation, Antonioni and his crew arrived in China in May 1972 and started a five-week tour, filming in Beijing, Lin County (of Henan Province), Suzhou, Nanjing, and Shanghai. The footage shot on this trip was later made into a documentary entitled *Chung Kuo* (1972), which was first released in the United States in 1972 and then broadcast in Italy in 1973.

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[1] Once allies within the Eastern Bloc, China and the USSR experienced a conflict on both political and ideological levels since the late 1950s for two main reasons, the leadership of world communism and the interpretation of Marxist ideology. Dissatisfied with the Soviet leader Khrushchev's inclination toward a "peaceful coexistence" with Western capitalism, Mao and the CPC maintained an antagonistic attitude toward the West and denounced the Soviet Union as the "revisionist traitor" of communism. In the early 1960s, this clash finally resulted in the Sino-Soviet Split, which dramatically induced a détente between China and Western countries because of their common enemy, the USSR.

[2] Prior to Antonioni, Italian left-wing writers such as Franco Fortini, Carlo Cassola, and Curzio Malaparte took trips to the PRC in the 1950s and portrayed Red China as an alternative model in contrast to the "unsatisfactory" Western society. Moreover, the Italian filmmaker Carlo Lizzani visited China in 1957 and produced a documentary titled *La Muraglia Cinese/Behind the Great Wall*, which sympathizes with Chinese communism and presents a laudatory image of China to the West. Historically, these positive events also contributed to the occurrence of Antonioni's production of *Chung Kuo*.

To Antonioni's surprise, *Chung Kuo* soon received harsh criticism from the Chinese authorities and became the target of a massive political attack, even though it was never publicly screened in China until 2004. On January 30, 1974, *People's Daily* published a commentary entitled "A Vicious Motive, Despicable Tricks – A Criticism of Antonioni's Anti-China Film *Chung Kuo.*" This official condemnation foreshadowed a string of similar critiques throughout the country. In June 1974, these denunciations were compiled by the People's Literature Publishing House into an anthology with the title of *Chinese People Are Not Allowed to Be Insulted – Repudiating Antonioni's Anti-China Film Chung Kuo*. As Antonioni's compatriot Umberto Eco comments, "the anti-Fascist artist who went to China inspired by affection and respect and who found himself accused of being a Fascist, a reactionary in the pay of Soviet revisionism and American imperialism, hated by 800 million persons."[3] Thus, Antonioni's documentary, along with the censure that it inspired, constitutes a meaningful event that may offer insight into the relationship between left-wing politics and left-wing aesthetics.

On the philosophical level, Alain Badiou conceptualizes "event" as an originary site in which the truth of being emerges: "veracity thus has two sources: being, which multiplies the infinite knowledge of the pure multiple; and the event, in which a truth originates, itself multiplying incalculable veracities. Situated in being, subjective emergence forces the event to decide the true of the situation."[4] In other words, event not only materializes being but also reveals the situational significance of the world's multiplicity. In this chapter, I want to examine

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[3] Eco, "De Interpretatione, or the Difficulty of Being Marco Polo [On the Occasion of Antonioni's China Film]," 9.

[4] Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum, 2005), 430.

Chung Kuo and its historical consequence from the Badiouian perspective of event. By juxtaposing Antonioni's affinity with Red China and the Chinese critics' denunciation of *Chung Kuo*, my goal is to tease out the phenomenality embedded in this cinematic event and clarify the (mis)understanding between Western leftist aesthetics and Chinese leftist politics.

3.1. China as Heterotopia: Unraveling Antonioni's Love for the Other

A bona fide master of film, Antonioni stepped into screenland as a descendant of Italian neorealism. In 1942, he co-wrote *A Pilot Returns* with the neorealist pioneer Roberto Rossellini. The next year, Antonioni started a career in which he produced a series of short films in the neorealist mode. Among them, *People of the Po River* (1947) sympathetically portrays the lives of impoverished fishermen. It not only symbolizes the director's leftist sentiment but also presages the aesthetics of *Chung Kuo* for its documentary-like cinematography.

Figure 3.1. "The Heroine's Imaginary Detonation of the Commercial Resort." *Zabriskie Point*, directed by Michelangelo Antonioni (1970; Burbank, CA: Warner Bros., 2009), DVD. (left)
Figure 3.2. "The Poetic Explosions of Consumeristic Images." *Zabriskie Point*. (right)

In 1950, Antonioni's first full-length feature film, *Story of a Love Affair*, marked his break from neorealism by resituating the protagonists in the bourgeoisie and adopting a psychological perspective. Despite this stylistic shift, Antonioni remained politically left throughout his artistic life. This fact is typically reflected in the ending of his masterpiece *Zabriskie Point* (1970): the heroine's imaginary detonation of the commercial resort (Figure 3.1)

and the subsequent poetic explosions of consumeristic images (Figure 3.2) symbolically signify the director's critical attitude toward capitalism.[5]

From a distinct left-wing perspective, Antonioni was eager to find an alternative to capitalist culture and engage in a visual revolution through his cinematic lens. At this point, communist China met his expectation as an ideal other:

> I think of China's contemporary socio-political structure as a model, perhaps inimitable, worthy of the most attentive study… I had the impression, observing people work, that each of them accepts the duties he has, even the most onerous, in peace, and with the consciousness of doing something useful for the community – a deep-seated feeling in the Chinese of today. In my brief stay in that country (little more than a month), I did not notice that this feeling entered into conflict with individuality.[6]

In Antonioni's view, Red China maintains an exceptional balance between individuality and collectivity. However, this perception fails to recognize the historical fact that Chinese people's individuality was largely repressed during the Cultural Revolution. For him, Chinese communism is not so much a social reality as a conceptual contrast to Western capitalism. Regarding Antonioni's biased conception of China, Michel Foucault's theory of "heterotopia" may serve as an inspirational framework.

In "Of Other Spaces," Foucault proposes an intriguing concept of "heterotopia" on the basis of utopia. For him, heterotopia is an "effectively enacted Utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented,

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[5] *Zabriskie Point's* leftist tendency can also be detected in its substantial portrait of the counterculture movement in the 1960s and the hero's alias of "Carl Marx."

[6] Michelangelo Antonioni, "China and the Chinese," in *The Architecture of Vision: Writings and Interviews on Cinema*, ed. Carlo Di Carlo, Giorgio Tinazzi, and Marga Cottino-Jones (New York: Marsilio, 1996), 116-17.

contested, and inverted."[7] In other words, it signifies an ideal space in reality with a distinct sense of difference and alienation. From this perspective, China seems to assume a heterotopian function in the case of *Chung Kuo*: rather than an object calling for realist representation, China for Antonioni appears as a sentimental ideal in opposition to the "decadent" Western world. As a matter of fact, the significance of Red China, for Antonioni, is rooted in its political alternative to capitalism. It is this heterotopian complexity that drives the director's visual exploration of communist China.

On the theoretical level, Foucault further employs a metaphor of the mirror in order to deepen the significance of heterotopia in a more intuitive way:

> From the standpoint of the mirror, I discover my absence from the place where I am, since I see myself over there. Starting from this gaze that is, as it were, directed toward me, from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am.[8]

Basically, what Foucault suggests is a reflective mechanism of cultural identity: the subject is able to reexamine or even reconstruct itself by visualizing the projection of its subjectivity in a virtual space of the other. Here, the camera in *Chung Kuo* serves as an equivalent of this Foucauldian mirror. Through its lens, the heterotopian China is cinematically presented as an enthralling image. As Antonioni states himself, "[Chinese] social structures are abstract entities that call for a different visual discourse, more didactic than my own, so extemporaneous and

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[7] Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," in *The Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff (London: Routledge, 1998), 239.

[8] Ibid., 240.

instinctual."[9] In other words, the otherness of Chinese society during the Cultural Revolution ideologically catered to Antonioni's dissatisfaction with Western capitalism. For him, documenting China functions more as a means to confirm his progressive self than to represent the communist other. After all, as "a film made with love, not with opinion,"[10] *Chung Kuo* manifests not only as a delicate documentary but also a visual heterotopia teeming with Antonioni's leftist thinking and sympathetic affect.

To fully understand the dynamics driving the event, I want to unravel Antonioni's "love" for Red China within Michael Hardt's framework of "political love." In *The Procedures of Love*, Hardt points out that "a political love must be a revolutionary force that radically breaks with the structures of the social life we know, overthrowing its norms and institutions."[11] In the case of *Chung Kuo*, Antonioni's conscious abhorrence of Western capitalism and his idealistic admiration of Chinese communism serve as the basis for this "political love," predicated on the negation of the existing order and the transcendence of self. Essentially, it is this revolutionary sentiment that constitutes the motivating force for Antonioni's love for the other and his production of *Chung Kuo*. On the technical level, this leftist momentum is primarily conveyed through his massive deployment of realist cinematography. It is based on the political agency of realism that Antonioni offers his portrait of Chinese society to manifest his "political love" for Red China.

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[9] Michelangelo Antonioni, "The History of Cinema Is Made on Film," in *The Architecture of Vision: Writings and Interviews on Cinema*, 201.

[10] Gideon Bachmann, "Talking of Michelangelo," *The Guardian* (London), February 18, 1975.

[11] Michael Hardt, *The Procedures of Love* (Ostfildern, DE: Hatje Cantz, 2012), 6.

3.2. Revealing the "Human Landscape": Cinematic Realism in *Chung Kuo*

At the beginning of *Chung Kuo*, Antonioni announces his artistic goal: "it is them, the Chinese, who are the protagonists of our motion picture. We are not pretending to understand China. All we hope for is to present a large collection of faces, gestures, [and] customs."[12] In other words, he does not intend to assume the Chinese phenomena with his European mindset. Instead, the objective is to understand Chinese society by representing down-to-earth Chinese people and their ways of life.

Figure 3.3. "Off-hour Discussion Group of Beijing's Third Cotton Factory." *Chung Kuo*, directed by Michelangelo Antonioni (1972; Brighton, UK: Mr. Bongo, 2012), DVD. (left)
Figure 3.4. "The Meeting of a Village's Revolutionary Committee in Lin County." *Chung Kuo*. (right)

For example, in the section of Beijing's Third Cotton Factory, Antonioni presents a scenario in which several workers get together after work to discuss topics such as a recent art exhibition, the interpretation of Chairman Mao's thoughts, and most significantly, the need to improve cotton production in support of a "world revolution"[13] (Figure 3.3). Similarly, in the

[12] *Chung Kuo*, directed by Michelangelo Antonioni (1972; Brighton, UK: Mr. Bongo, 2012), DVD.

[13] Antonioni deploys voice-over to comment on this scene: "the Chinese engage into discussions with enthusiasm, even though they tend to become repetitive and monotonous… The

section on the agricultural commune in Lin County, the director offers a documentary record of the Revolutionary Committee's meeting, in which the members read Chairman Mao's quotations before they enthusiastically discuss the cooperation between "ideological work" and agricultural production (Figure 3.4). Given the characters' homogeneous attire and dedicated attitudes, these scenes provide the audience with an intuitive perception of Chinese people's living conditions in the communist era: the society is immensely politicized, and individual lives are both subordinate and devoted to collective causes. On the cinematic level, this representational mode constitutes *Chung Kuo*'s first dimension of cinematic realism, that is, to investigate Chinese society through the manifestation of Chinese people's characteristic appearance, utterance, and interpersonal activity. It is based on this concrete representation that Antonioni engages in his cinematic investigation into the deeper essence of Chinese society.

In a retrospective essay, Antonioni claims that "the China I saw is no fairy tale. It is a human landscape, very different from ours, yet also concrete and modern. These are the faces that have invaded the screen of my film."[14] At this point, the concept of "human landscape" is noteworthy: penetrating the surface of life, the director seeks to grasp the deeper essence of Chinese society by representing its perceivable reality. In the tradition of left-wing aesthetics,

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moderator praises the artists, because, following the teachings of Mao, they put art to the service of workers, peasants and soldiers… There are no real debates. They just put forward suggestions for various amendments." Here, it is obvious that the director shows disapproval toward the workers' ideologized public life. Throughout the film, this combination of realist representation and critical observation constitutes a major aesthetic feature of *Chung Kuo.*

[14] Michelangelo Antonioni, "Is It Still Possible to Film a Documentary?", in *The Architecture of Vision: Writings and Interviews on Cinema*, 109.

this realist cinematography is indebted to Georg Lukács's idea of realism. In his study of the modern novel, Lukács espouses realism in recognition of its revelatory prowess:

> Every major realist fashions the material given in his own experience… But his goal is to penetrate the laws governing objective reality and to uncover the deeper, hidden, mediated, not immediately perceptible network of relationships that go to make up society… [Realist representation] creates a new immediacy, one that is artistically mediated… as life as it actually appears. Moreover, in the works of such writers we observe the whole surface of life in all its essential determinants, and not just a subjectively perceived moment isolated from the totality in an abstract and over-intense manner.[15]

On the philosophical level, Lukács sets a high value on realism's epistemic significance. By adopting realist methods, the artist can arguably transcend details and unveil universality. This conception of realism as an aesthetic epistemology is further pronounced by Fredric Jameson: "realism… is a hybrid concept, in which an epistemological claim (for knowledge or truth) masquerades as an aesthetic ideal."[16] Moreover, in Lukács's opinion, realism "captures tendencies of development that only exist incipiently and so have not yet had the opportunity to unfold their entire human and social potential."[17] In other words, realism can aesthetically manifest the ideological progressiveness of the new ascendant class. Based on Hegelian-Marxist dialectic, this Lukácsian realism is endowed with political significance and serves as an aesthetic means for a revolutionary end. Given Antonioni's dissatisfaction with Western society and fascination with Red China, the cinematic realism in *Chung Kuo* can be viewed as an artistic version of "changing the world" through "interpreting the world." In the context of film theory,

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[15] Lukács, "Realism in the Balance," 38-39.

[16] Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (London: Verso, 2013), 5.

[17] Lukács, "Realism in the Balance," 48.

this Lukácsian realism is embodied in Benjamin's and Zavattini's observations on the political agency of motion picture.

In the light of Lukácsian realism, *Chung Kuo*'s second dimension of cinematic realism significantly unfolds: in search of its difference to the West, Antonioni aspires to present characteristic social elements of Red China and reveal the underlying zeitgeist of Chinese communism. To achieve this, he dwells on institutions such as the factory, the agricultural commune, the kindergarten, and the elementary school, providing meaningful scenes by combining visual representation and voice-over commentary.

Figure 3.5. "The Production Practice of the Textile Workshop." *Chung Kuo*. (upper left)
Figure 3.6. "Off-hour Discussion Group of Beijing's Third Cotton Factory." *Chung Kuo*. (upper right)
Figure 3.7. "The Daily Routine of a Worker's Household." *Chung Kuo*. (lower left)
Figure 3.8. "The Kindergarten Affiliated with Beijing's Third Cotton Factory." *Chung Kuo*. (lower right)

Specifically, in the section of Beijing's Third Cotton Factory, Antonioni vividly illustrates the urban lifestyle of communism by presenting a variety of scenes such as the production practice of the textile workshop (Figure 3.5), the above-mentioned off-hour discussion group (Figure 3.6), the daily routine of a worker's household (Figure 3.7), and the kindergarten affiliated with the factory (Figure 3.8). In particular, the director tends to accentuate the holistic quality of these aspects: individual lives are integrated into a huge community in which industrial production and daily life fuse organically.[18] Featuring conformity and uniformity, this collective way of life stands in sharp contrast to its Western counterpart, which fundamentally underlines individuality and diversity. As a result, Antonioni's visualization offers Western audiences a seminal opportunity to demystify the social totality of China in "parts."

Another example of revelatory realism can be found in Antonioni's depiction of the agricultural commune in Lin County, known as "the first pinnacle of Socialism." Juxtaposing its harsh natural conditions and remarkable achievements exemplified by the Red Flag Canal (Figure 3.9), the director effectively conducts a visual investigation into China's featured organization of production, the People's Commune. With concentrations on the Production Team's farm work (Figure 3.10) and the Revolutionary Committee's leadership (Figure 3.4), Antonioni endeavors to demonstrate how productive factors are characteristically mobilized in rural China. Through realist lens, his objective is to scrutinize Chinese communism and delineate its radical social experiment by highlighting its non-Western elements such as public ownership, collective orientation, and ideological manipulation.

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[18] On the technical level, this intention can be testified to by the visual juxtaposition of the lady's indoor cooking in the foreground and children's outdoor playing in the background, as shown in Figure 3.7.

Figure 3.9. "The Red Flag Canal." *Chung Kuo*. (left)
Figure 3.10. "The Production Team's Farm Work in Lin County." *Chung Kuo*. (right)

Throughout the film, the most salient demonstration of revelatory realism lies in Antonioni's representation of Chinese schools and kindergartens. On the philosophical level, this focus on education is possibly indebted to Antonio Gramsci, the pioneer of Italian Marxism. Based on Hegel's concept of Civil Society, Gramsci puts forward "a hegemony exercised by means of and through the organizations commonly called private, such as the Church, the Trade Unions, and schools, etc."[19] Basically, what he indicates is a cultural route to political dominance: these institutions are meant to diffuse ideologies among citizens and produce social consensus in a gradual manner. This Gramscian idea of hegemony is further developed in Louis Althusser's ISA, epitomized by the social system of education: "the reproduction of labor power requires not only a reproduction of its skills, but also, at the same time, a reproduction of its submission to the rules of the established order… the school… teaches 'know-how,' but in forms which ensure subjection to the ruling ideology or the mastery of its 'practice.'"[20] As the most

[19] Antonio Gramsci, *Gramsci's Prison Letters*, trans. Hamish Henderson (London: Zwan Publications, 1988), 161.

[20] Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," 132-33.

significant ISA in modern society, education, for Althusser, signifies the reproduction of labor power and serves as a hegemonic factor to political dominance. On the structural level, it functions as an ideological apparatus that facilitates the maintenance of the country.

Figure 3.11. "Kindergarten Girls Singing *Sailing the Seas Depends on the Helmsman*." *Chung Kuo*. (left)
Figure 3.12. "P. E. class in the Elementary School Affiliated with Beijing's Third Cotton Factory." *Chung Kuo*. (right)

Although the notions of hegemony and the ISA are meant to analyze the ideological dominance of capitalist society, they can also be used as a framework for illuminating Antonioni's portrait of Chinese education in *Chung Kuo*. Focusing on the affiliated schools of Beijing's Third Cotton Factory, Antonioni presents expressive images of the student's music and P. E. classes (Figures 3.11 and 3.12). By contrasting the little girls' innocence and the ideological nature of their songs by visual and aural means respectively, the director powerfully reveals how collectivism is implanted in Chinese culture by educational means.[21] As he comments in the

[21] Two songs are prominently documented: *Sailing the Seas Depends on the Helmsman* and *I Love Beijing Tiananmen*. The lyrics of the former goes, "sailing the seas depends on the helmsman. The growth of all living beings depends on the sun. Rain and dew nourish young seedlings. Conducting revolution depends on Mao Tse-tung's thought," while that of the latter goes, "I love Beijing Tiananmen, where the sun rises. The greatest leader Chairman Mao leads all of us forward."

voice-over, "starting from childhood, they are prepared for the future life in a collectivist society. Their grace makes us forget that almost all songs they are singing have political connotations."[22] This visceral remark reveals the fact that Antonioni maintains a dynamic balance between his professional ethics as a documentarist and his leftist identification with Red China. In *Chung Kuo*, this revelatory realism is also deployed when the director exhibits the schoolboys' sports activity: embedded in the rules of the game,[23] the collectivist conception of "unity begets survival" symbolically unfolds and manifests itself as a hegemonic ideology of communist China.

Figure 3.13. "The Nap Room of a Nanjing Kindergarten." *Chung Kuo*. (left)
Figure 3.14. "Kindergarten Boys Impersonating the PLA." *Chung Kuo*. (right)

In his Nanjing footage, Antonioni also dwells on education to represent the zeitgeist of Chinese communism. In a kindergarten, for instance, he displays the interior of a children's nap room (Figure 3.13): the multiplicity of the beds and the orderliness of the bedding visually

[22] *Chung Kuo*.

[23] With the name of "hawk catches chicken," this popular game encourages individuals to cling to and coordinate with their group, in order to avoid being "caught and eaten" by the "hawk." On the socio-cultural level, it functions as a metaphorical training in enhancing children's collective consciousness.

suggest the collectivist culture that permeates their lives. In what follows, the director highlights a group of kindergarten boys impersonating the People's Liberation Army (PLA) while singing revolutionary songs (Figure 3.14). In this image, the spears on their shoulders and the slogan that they frequently shout, "fear neither hardship nor death," subtly uncover the militarization of elementary education in China. Under this keynote, Antonioni further uses a full-length close-up to capture the march-in ceremony of a primary school's sports meet (Figure 3.15). The incredible synchronization of the athletes, along with the enthusiastic cheer from the audience, "friendship comes before championship," constitutes a dynamic portrayal of the hegemonic collectivism embedded in Chinese education: young bodies are caught in the tension between the stimulation of competitiveness and the advocacy of fraternity.

Figure 3.15. "The March-in Ceremony of a Primary School's Sports Meet." *Chung Kuo*. (left)
Figure 3.16. "Mao Tse-tung's Portrait on the Sports Field." *Chung Kuo*. (right)

When discussing the role of political ceremony, Michel Foucault unravels the phenomenality of the parade centering on the individual: "in it the 'subject' was presented as 'object' to the observation of a power that was manifested only by its gaze. They did not receive directly the image of the sovereign power; they only felt its effects – in replica, as it were – on

their bodies, which had become precisely legible and docile."[24] From this perspective, the subsequent shot in which Antonioni intentionally captures Mao's portrait on the field is highly meaningful (Figure 3.16): the virtual existence of Mao serves as a gazing power that, in Althusserian terms, "interpellates" the marching students as revolutionary subjects. Thus, through the lens of revelatory realism, the director not only manifests the collectivist orientation of Chinese education but also reveals the underlying mechanism of its ideological production.

Figure 3.17. "Girls – Dolls Montage." *Chung Kuo*.

Besides revelatory realism, Antonioni further adopts the technique of montage to visually anatomize Chinese society. This third dimension of cinematic realism constitutes a powerful means by which he interprets the "text" of communist China based on its socio-political conditions. In the history of left-wing documentary, this strategy is indebted to Dziga Vertov, who pins hopes on montage's cognitive function and holds that film has a transcendental prowess that may extend the faculty of the human eye and effectuate a deeper sense of reality.[25] In *Chung Kuo*, Antonioni further develops the progressive aesthetics of Vertovian montage with

[24] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 188.

[25] Vertov, "From Kino-Eye to Radio-Eye," 87.

multiple demonstrations. In the Nanjing kindergarten, for example, he offers several close-ups of the sitting children, culminating in the image of two seemingly passive girls. In the subsequent shot, the vision is abruptly switched to a few dolls lying in the corner (Figure 3.17). Combined with the voice-over expounding on collectivist ideology, this montage arguably displays the director's criticism of communist education: the individuality of children is sacrificed in the name of collectivism, and the kindergarten thus functions as a site of institutionalization facilitating consensus and homogeneity.

Figure 3.18. "Standing Guard – Hanging Clothes Montage." *Chung Kuo*. (upper left and upper right)
Figure 3.19. "Servicewoman – Militiawoman Montage." *Chung Kuo*. (lower left and lower right)

Also in his Nanjing footage, Antonioni presents two sets of montage with soldiers as protagonists. In the first case, the camera gazes at a sentry attentively standing guard and then moves on to an off-duty serviceman hanging clothes under the Nanjing Yangtze River Bridge (Figure 3.18). As for the second montage, the vision initially follows two soldiers, a man and a woman, walking on the street. After several close-ups of the servicewoman's profile, it

eventually focuses on a roadside billboard featuring a propaganda image of a militiawoman (Figure 3.19). As I see it, these two montages embody the director's extraordinary understanding of Chinese society. On the one hand, the protagonists are revolutionary soldiers endowed with vigilance and militancy, represented by the images of the sentry and the militiawoman, respectively. On the other hand, they are down-to-earth human beings leading their ordinary and mundane lives, exemplified by the actions of hanging clothes and strolling on the street. This revelatory montage, in addition to the above-examined revelatory representations, serves as a powerful means by which Antonioni cinematically reveals the "human landscape" of Red China.

On the level of reception, these three montages inspired a series of reactions among Chinese critics in the later campaign against *Chung Kuo*. First and foremost, Antonioni's employment of montage was denounced as a technique for disparaging Red China: "Antonioni heavily plays the trick of 'shot combination' – connecting either scenes of different times and locations or things of different categories – to conduct reactionary political propaganda."[26] And the "girls – dolls montage" is singled out as a particular example. At this point, it seems that on the one hand, Antonioni's visual signification was so straightforward that it was easily recognizable; on the other hand, the Chinese authorities appeared to be highly sensitive about possible denigration from the outside.[27] Besides, another critic's reaction to the montages about soldiers is hilariously thought-provoking:

[26] Hong Yida, "Reactionary Politics, Degenerate Art," in *Chinese People Are Not Allowed to Be Insulted – Repudiating Antonioni's Anti-China Film Chung Kuo* (Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, 1974), 112.

[27] During the Cultural Revolution, newspaper commentaries were composed mainly by writers controlled by the Chinese authorities. Thus, this article, as well as other critical essays included in the anthology, substantially reflect the official opinion of communist China.

> Antonioni secretly filmed a guard hanging clothes under the Nanjing Yangtze River Bridge. This shot can neither decrease the bridge's height and length nor reduce the PLA soldiers' honor and pride. Not only are they the active constructors and brave protectors of the bridge, they are also the glorious heirs of the PLA's noble tradition of endurance and austerity. Here, we would like to question Mr. Antonioni instead: what's bad about washing clothes with one's own hands? You think you can take advantage of China by capturing scenes like that, yet it reveals nothing but your inanity and low taste! In downtown Nanjing, you stalked two walking soldiers, a man and a woman, vainly attempting to find the bourgeois army's corrupted lifestyle in them. Obviously, their outstanding integrity and exceptional vigor slapped you hard in the face, in response to your reactionary provocation![28]

Apparently, the Chinese critic misunderstood Antonioni's cinematography and imposed ideological significance on those shots. Among all the reasons, the critics' revolutionary sentiment, especially the socio-political priority given to the military, fosters this unusual interpretation: under the slogan of "be prepared against war and natural disasters," 1970s Chinese society was mobilized into a quasi-military community in which spartanism was considered an absolute merit. As a result, the critic fails to grasp Antonioni's intention in the "servicewoman – militiawoman montage," because the belligerence manifested in the poster ideologically caters to China's ideal type of personality at that time. Instead, the critic targets the shots of an off-duty sentry hanging clothes and two soldiers of the opposite sex walking on the street, given that their respective implications of relaxation and affection morally conflict with the then current mainstream value of spartanism. Thus, Antonioni's revelatory montage, besides begetting realistic revelation of Chinese society, appears as a cultural text in which the director's visual signification and the critics' ideological interpretation dramatically intertwine. In the final

[28] Ba Yibing, "The People's Liberation Army Is Indestructible," in *Chinese People Are Not Allowed to Be Insulted – Repudiating Antonioni's Anti-China Film Chung Kuo*, 61-62. It is worth mentioning that this pseudonym 巴毅兵, pronounced as "Ba Yi Bing," is an artificial homonym of 八亿兵, which literally means "800 million soldiers."

section of this chapter, I will concentrate on the Chinese reception of *Chung Kuo* and further elucidate the phenomenality of this film as a cultural event.

3.3. Yearning for the Other: The Visual Ethics of *Chung Kuo*

Antonioni was fully conscious that it was difficult for a Westerner to cross the cultural barrier and gain a deep understanding of Chinese society. This conviction is expressed in a comment he made in a retrospective essay: "a famous Sinologist, during a debate, observed that every person who spends a month in China feels capable of writing a book, but after spending a few months he may write just a few pages, and eventually, after a few years, he prefers to write nothing at all."[29] This statement indicates that Antonioni was clearly aware of the richness of Chinese culture and the distinction between the social circumstance of China and that of the West. Nevertheless, instead of being discouraged by this alterity, Antonioni was immensely attracted by the otherness of China and embarked on his cinematic exploration into Chinese society. On the one hand, the Chinese particularity catered to his desire for novelty and his horizon of expectations as a left-wing intellectual on the historical and political levels; on the other hand, the huge differences between Chinese and Western culture offered him a golden opportunity for a revelatory exploration by means of documentary film. In a way, it was this complexity of "yearning for the other" that fostered the director's determination to film *Chung Kuo*.

For Antonioni, China's "novelty as the other" first lies in its rich history and unique culture. In his own words, "for the men of our time, that immense country typifies contradiction. In most of us there is a 'Chinese temptation,' just as in Ling W. Y., that character of Malraux,

[29] Antonioni, "Is It Still Possible to Film a Documentary?", 107.

there was a 'Western temptation.'"[30] Indeed, the oriental exoticism of China largely stimulates the director's cultural and political curiosities. It is out of this acquisitiveness that he amply presents the traditionality of China throughout the film; specific cases include the portraits of Tai Chi practitioners (Figure 3.20) and a number of historical sites.

Figure 3.20. "Tai Chi Practitioners on the Street." *Chung Kuo*. (left)
Figure 3.21. "Acupuncture Anesthesia." *Chung Kuo*. (right)

Most prominently, Antonioni employs eight-and-a-half minutes documenting a C-section delivery in which acupuncture is used as an anesthesia (Figure 3.21). This scene is so exhaustive that both the doctor's maneuvers and the patient's reactions are exhibited to the audience in extreme detail. Moreover, the director celebrates this spectacle with the following voice-over: "It's a poor and simple practice. There is no need for expensive and complicated equipment. A very direct human contact is established between the doctor and the patient… Thus, the medical practice in China shows that it's possible to overcome grave obstacles with simple means and ancient teachings."[31] Here, Antonioni's obsession with Chinese culture clearly unfolds: in

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[30] Ling W. Y. is one of the heroes in the French writer André Malraux's epistolary novel *The Temptation of the West* (1926), whose plot centers on the cultural comparison between Europe and Asia.

[31] *Chung Kuo*.

pursuit of alterity, he is exceedingly dedicated to those cultural elements that do not exist in the Western world. For him, the miraculous efficacy of acupuncture and the humanistic tendency of Chinese medicine remarkably distinguish themselves from Western biochemical medicine. As a result, Antonioni takes advantage of these "exotic" phenomena to construct a "China" of his own making. From this perspective, *Chung Kuo* not only constitutes a visual representation of the other but also entails a visual construction of the other, for what the director aspires to manifest is a "real" China that stands in sharp contrast to the West.

Figure 3.22. "Old Lady with Bound Feet." *Chung Kuo*. (left)
Figure 3.23. "Close-up of Bound Feet." *Chung Kuo*. (right)

This visual ethics of "yearning for the other" can be detected throughout the film. As another example, Antonioni intentionally captures an old lady with bound feet in urban Beijing (Figure 3.22). To elaborate on a vivid close-up of her deformed feet (Figure 3.23), he tells an anecdotal story through voice-over: "one emperor had a concubine with shapely buttocks and tiny feet, and that's how this cruel custom has originated. The officials at the court decided that the prominent shape of the buttocks, a symbol of beauty, depends on the size of the feet. Hence they invented the custom."[32] In a manner similar to his deployment of acupuncture, the director

[32] *Chung Kuo*.

treats bound feet as a cultural spectacle and tends to highlight it in order to enhance the otherness of China. However, his explanation of the custom's origin is problematic, since foot-binding historically derives from ancient China's patriarchal dominance: it provides an object of gaze for men's twisted aesthetics and functions to limit women's scope of activity for the sake of chastity. In this light, Antonioni's interpretation subtly embodies an ethical significance: he unconsciously transplants the Western male-chauvinist preference for the way in which high-heeled shoes function to shape women's bodies. Therefore, his intent of portraying a "China as the other" dramatically turns out to echo his cultural self.

Figure 3.24. "Four Revolutionary Images in Urban Nanjing." *Chung Kuo*.

Besides displaying traditional Chinese culture, Antonioni also celebrates the otherness of China by highlighting revolutionary images. As a left-wing intellectual habituated to Western society, he shows abundant interest in the propaganda posters and Maoist symbols permeating Chinese society. For example, he exhibits four revolutionary images in urban Nanjing in a

sequence comprising Mao's portrait, representative figures holding Little Red Books,[33] a billboard with a Maoist quotation,[34] and a conspicuous sign that symbolizes the "great unity" of ethnic groups in China (Figure 3.24). This assemblage embodies Antonioni's ethical concerns as well as artistic ingenuity. On the one hand, he intensively showcases featured icons to highlight the revolutionary otherness of China in relation to the Western world. On the other hand, he subtly makes a visual analogy between the cult of Mao's personality and the institutional religions in the West; specific analogues include iconolatry, the worship of scripture, and the popularization of ideology. This maneuver facilitates the cinematic signification of Chinese otherness. Specifically, it is the encounter between the familiar and the unfamiliar that begets a more effective empathy between Western audiences and communist China. As with the director's misinterpretation of foot-binding, this case reveals that the manifestation of the other is ethically inseparable from the confirmation of self.

On the technical level, Antonioni excels at juxtaposing revolutionary images with Chinese people's real lives to create symbolic moments. For instance, he manipulates the camera to focus on a military poster as two transport laborers pass before it, dragging a heavy cart (Figure 3.25). This maneuver offers a visual illustration of China's alert posture in Maoist times. In another case, his cinematic vision rests on a portrait of Mao in a hospital corridor as a nurse

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[33] In communist China, the cluster of worker, farmer, and soldier serves as an iconic image representing the entire proletariat. And the Little Red Book is a common name for *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung*, which is considered to be one of the most published books in history.

[34] It says "historical experiences deserve our attention. We should constantly reiterate our route and guidelines – not only to the minority but also to the broad masses of the people." This statement was made by Mao during a meeting of the Central Cultural Revolution Group on November 4, 1968.

passes right in front of it (Figure 3.26). This juxtaposition correlates Mao's image with down-to-earth Chinese people and further reveals the power structure of Chinese society. Similar to the above-mentioned case of Mao's portrait on the sports field, Antonioni gives prominence to the idea of Mao's image as an ISA and delineates the visual dimension of China's social mobilization.

Figure 3.25. "The Juxtaposition of a Military Poster and Transport Laborers." *Chung Kuo*. (left)
Figure 3.26. "A Nurse Passing by Mao's Portrait." *Chung Kuo*. (right)

In a worker's household affiliated with Beijing's Third Cotton Factory, Antonioni offers a more elaborate visual application of Mao's image. After a brief presentation of the family's daily life and a home decor characterized by frugality, the camera focuses on a bust of Mao and a mirror that reflects the housewife using her sewing machine (Figure 3.27). At the same time, the housewife is asked by the crew about issues such as her daily routine and family members. In response to the question of "Do you have any grandchildren," she replies, "To build socialism, it is better if we can postpone it and keep the family to a limited scale."[35] Here, a series of cinematic devices jointly initiate a new dimension of interpretation. Specifically, Mao's gaze symbolically functions as an ideological power that exerts influence on ordinary Chinese people,

[35] *Chung Kuo*.

represented by the mirrored image of the seamstress. Furthermore, it is this absent charisma that virtually constructs her collectivist consciousness of subjugating private needs to the good of the country, testified to by her obedient answer to the question. By presenting such an ingenious scenario, Antonioni connects the emblematic bust with real Chinese people and offers the audience an opportunity to understand the relationship between revolutionary imagery and the social reality of communist China. Most notably, the mirror serves not only as a technical tool in terms of cinematography but also as a metaphorical agent through which a political hierarchy is skillfully established: the reflected housewife is subordinate to the corporeal bust of Mao in the image, and the Chinese people are subjected to the political leader's manipulation in real life.

Figure 3.27. "Mao's Bust and the Seamstress." *Chung Kuo*. (left)
Figure 3.28. "The Juxtaposition of Tradition and Revolution in Tiananmen Square." *Chung Kuo*. (right)

Based on the alterities of tradition and revolution, Antonioni further juxtaposes the two in order to deepen his cinematic examination of Red China. For example, at the beginning of *Chung Kuo*, he presents a variety of individuals in Tiananmen Square with their diverse facial expressions and bodily gestures (Figure 3.28). In particular, the director establishes a visual contrast between people's homogeneous communist garb in the foreground and the ancient architecture in the background. Moreover, he uses voice-over to strengthen this distinction:

"Despite all its imperial bearing, the square did not exist at the time of the great dynasties. It was born later out of the political need for a place of public reunions and demonstrations."[36] By highlighting the historical transformation of the square, Antonioni creates a cultural field where past and present spatially intersect and thus manifests the otherness of China by featuring the coexistence of tradition and revolution. After a more detailed exhibition of Beijing's "human landscape," the director further articulates the underlying temperament of the city: "A stern capital of the Revolution, Beijing does not exhibit much color. The garments are simple and frugal. Here, you can witness the virtues of the long-forgotten times: decency, modesty, the spirit of self-restraint."[37] At this point, Antonioni articulates the ethos of Beijing from the imperial capital to the revolutionary capital. As a prominent strategy of his cinematic production, this maneuver of correlating the two alterities situates Western audiences in the cultural context of Red China at the outset of the film.

Figure 3.29. "Villagers Gazing Back at the Crew." *Chung Kuo*. (left)
Figure 3.30. "A Farmer Peeping at the Crew from behind a Wall." *Chung Kuo*. (right)

[36] Ibid.

[37] Ibid.

Although Antonioni skillfully reveals the otherness of China throughout *Chung Kuo*, his "yearning for the other" encounters an intriguing challenge in the countryside of Lin County. Specifically, over the course of documenting Chinese people's rural lives, the crew was besieged by a group of villagers because of their great curiosity about foreigners (Figures 3.29 and 3.30). In the voice-over, the director describes the scene as follows: "These Chinese have never seen a Westerner. They come to the doorways, amazed, a bit scared and curious. They can't resist the temptation to stare at us. We go on with filming. But, soon, we realize that it is we who are peculiar and foreign. For the people on the other side of the camera, we are completely unknown and perhaps a bit ridiculous."[38] Obviously, the unusual circumstance has caused a dramatic reversal in respect to the object of the gaze. Focusing on the ethics of self and other, I would like to unravel this event from the phenomenological point of view.

In *Being and Time*, Martin Heidegger proposes a dynamic relationship between self and other:

> On the basis of this with-bound being-in-the-world, the world is always already the one that I share with others. The world of Dasein is a with-world. Being-in is being-with others. The innerworldly being-in-itself of others is Dasein-with. Others are not encountered by grasping and discriminating beforehand one's own subject, initially objectively present, from other subjects also present. They are not encountered by first looking at oneself and then ascertaining the opposite pole of a distinction. They are encountered from out of the world in which Dasein, heedful and circumspect, essentially dwells… This nearest and elemental way of Dasein encountering the world goes so far that even one's own Dasein initially becomes "discoverable" by looking away from its "experiences" and the "center of its actions," or by not yet "seeing" them at all. Dasein initially finds "itself" in what it does, needs, expects, has charge of, in the things at hand which it initially takes care of in the surrounding world.[39]

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[38] Ibid.

[39] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: SUNY Press, 2010), 115-16.

Here, Heidegger first indicates a coexistence of self and other, that is, the being-in-the-world self inevitably entails its cohabitation with the other. Moreover, he maintains that it is fundamentally through the other that the subject is able to confirm his or her self-identity because the manifestation of the other is phenomenologically conducive to the realization of self's particularity.

Within this framework, the ethical significance of the aforementioned incident in the village unfolds. Specifically, the camera functions as an ocular apparatus that begets the dichotomy of self – Antonioni and his crew – and the other – the Chinese farmers. In search of otherness, the director focuses on the villagers and intends to exert power over them by representing their lives. However, the oddness of the intruders' identity and the closed state of China at that time subtly induce an inversion of the power structure: the crew members seem to be more unfamiliar to the Chinese farmers rather than the other way around, and the villagers thus deprive the crew members of their visual power by gazing back at them. On the ethical level, this event situates Antonioni in the experience of being self and other at the same time. In a way, what he discovers in the village is as much about his own identity as about that of the Chinese farmers. This epiphany further arouses his reflection on Eurocentrism: "A hard blow against our European arrogance! For one fourth of the earth's population, we are so unfamiliar that it fills us with awe."[40] Indeed, the phenomenality of this event not only deconstructs the director's accustomed mode of representation but also constitutes a reflective moment in which he rethinks his awareness of self. From this perspective, Antonioni's cinematography of "yearning for the other" exhibits, on the one hand, the Chinese alterities of tradition and

[40] *Chung Kuo*.

revolution to Western audiences and creates, on the other hand, a visual site where the ethics of self and other dynamically unfolds.

3.4. Accused by the People: The Clash between Antonioni and His Chinese Critics

As previously mentioned, *Chung Kuo* was harshly criticized by the Chinese authorities in 1974, two years after its completion. On the historical level, this incident stemmed from the internal power struggle in Chinese politics. Specifically, the Gang of Four[41] launched this campaign to attack the then Chinese premier Zhou Enlai, who was chiefly responsible for sponsoring Antonioni's trip to China. In this sense, *Chung Kuo* "would be only a pretext, a casus belli chosen by a Peking power group to advance the anti-Confucian campaign."[42] It was on this account that many of the critiques of *Chung Kuo* appeared to be highly unreasonable, for they were substantially ideological products in the service of political struggle.[43] The dispute over

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[41] As the dominant political faction during the Cultural Revolution, the Gang of Four was composed of Mao's last wife Jiang Qing, Zhang Chunqiao, Yao Wenyuan, and Wang Hongwen. Historians tend to believe they functioned as Mao's political managers in the movement. Their downfall on October 6, 1976, one month after Mao's death, marked the ending of the Cultural Revolution.

[42] Eco, "De Interpretatione, or the Difficulty of Being Marco Polo [On the Occasion of Antonioni's China Film]," 9. Indirectly pointing at Zhou Enlai, the Criticize Lin (Biao), Criticize Confucius Campaign was a political movement started by Mao and the Gang of Four, with the purpose of producing a Maoist interpretation of Chinese history and attacking their political enemies.

[43] The following quote may well illustrate the general style of *Chinese People Are Not Allowed to Be Insulted:* "since the day the five-star red flag was hoisted over Tien An Men Square and the birth of the new China was proclaimed, different political forces in the world have assumed different attitudes toward the earth-shaking social changes in China and the tremendous achievements of her socialist construction. Hundreds of millions of revolutionary people and friends all over the world have voiced admiration and sympathy, while a handful of reactionary forces are filled with great terror and deep hatred…. The anti-China film *China* by the Italian director M. Antonioni, which started showing in some Western countries last year, reflects the attitude of the tiny handful of imperialists and social-imperialists in the present-day

Chung Kuo can also be analyzed from perspectives such as cross-cultural communication, the schism between documentary realism and socialist realism, and the ritualized aesthetics of communist China. Fundamentally, the conflict between Western leftist aesthetics and Chinese leftist politics at the heart of the *Chung Kuo* event invites in-depth investigations on multiple levels. In this section, I will examine the critical essays compiled in *Chinese People Are Not Allowed to Be Insulted – Repudiating Antonioni's Anti-China Film Chung Kuo*. Based on my previous analysis of Antonioni's significant scenes, my goal is to create a fusion of horizons between the discourse of Antonioni and that of the Chinese authorities and further enunciate the cultural significance behind this exceptional event triggered by *Chung Kuo*.

First and foremost, cultural misunderstanding plays an important role in the Chinese critics' attack on the documentary, which Antonioni allegedly "made with love."[44] In this regard, the director's compatriot, Umberto Eco, offered his insight into the Chinese reaction to *Chung Kuo* from the semiotic perspective:

> The *China* question reminds us that when political debate and artistic representation involve different cultures on a worldwide scale, art and politics are also mediated by anthropology and thus by semiology. We cannot open a dialogue on identical class problems among different cultures if we do not first resolve the problem of symbolic superstructures through which different civilizations represent to themselves the same political and social problems.[45]

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world who have inveterate hatred for the new China." (*Renmin Ribao* Commentator, *A Vicious Motive, Despicable Tricks – A Criticism of Antonioni's Anti-China Film Chung Kuo*, Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1974. 1.) This discursive mode, featuring political and personal attacks, is ubiquitous throughout *Chinese People Are Not Allowed to Be Insulted*.

[44] Bachmann, "Talking of Michelangelo."

[45] Eco, "De Interpretatione, or the Difficulty of Being Marco Polo [On the Occasion of Antonioni's China Film]," 9.

In this commentary, Eco proposes an "anthropological semiology" to understand the issue of politics and aesthetics on the cross-cultural level. Specifically, he suggests an investigation into the Chinese "symbolic superstructures," within which phenomena are conventionally comprehended in the Chinese context. For example, Eco unravels the Chinese criticism of Antonioni's juxtaposition of the music from *Song of the Dragon River*[46] and the image of pigs in a commune (Figure 3.31) by pointing out the particular significance of the musical fragment in the context of the Cultural Revolution: "unfortunately this fragment happened to be more or less the equivalent of our *Fratelli d'Italia*, evoking in the Chinese viewer the same reaction that a bishop might experience seeing a clinch accompanied by the hymn *Tantum Ergo*."[47] Here, he not only implies the structural similitude between Chinese communism and Western Catholicism but also explains the Chinese grievance against Antonioni on the semiotic and cultural levels.

Figure 3.31. "Pigs Awakened by the Music from *Song of the Dragon River*." *Chung Kuo*.

[46] Premiered in 1969, *Song of the Dragon River* is a prominent revolutionary Beijing opera in line with the "eight model plays" that dominated the Chinese stage and screens during the Cultural Revolution. Engineered by Mao's wife Jiang Qing, who was once a movie star in the Republican period, revolutionary Beijing opera appeared as a cultural experiment corresponding to the radical momentum of Chinese communism.

[47] Eco, "De Interpretatione, or the Difficulty of Being Marco Polo [On the Occasion of Antonioni's China Film]," 11. It is worth mentioning that *Fratelli d'Italia* is the national anthem of Italy, while *Tantum Ergo* is an excerpt from *Pange Lingua*, a Medieval Latin hymn written by St. Thomas Aquinas.

As Eco points out, the superstructure of Red China was highly conducive to the negative reception of the film. In *Chinese People Are Not Allowed to Be Insulted*, the Chinese critics denounce the production of *Chung Kuo* from a variety of perspectives. In the names of workers, soldiers, and writers, they criticize Antonioni's cinematography based on the moral value of the Cultural Revolution. It is this ideological tension between political leftism and aesthetic leftism that induces a cross-cultural event in which the theoretical relationship between politics and art can be unraveled in the context of left-wing culture.

On the flyleaf of *Chinese People Are Not Allowed to Be Insulted*, the editor presents several quotations from Chairman Mao's Little Red Book. Among them, two paragraphs stand out for their high pertinence to the critique of *Chung Kuo*:

> We the Chinese nation have the spirit to fight the enemy to the last drop of our blood, the determination to recover our lost territory by our own efforts, and the ability to stand on our own feet in the family of nations.
> I hold that it is bad as far as we are concerned if a person, a political party, an army or a school is not attacked by the enemy, for in that case it would definitely mean that we have sunk to the level of the enemy. It is good if we are attacked by the enemy, since it proves that we have drawn a clear line of demarcation between the enemy and ourselves. It is still better if the enemy attacks us wildly and paints us as utterly black and without a single virtue; it demonstrates that we have not only drawn a clear line of demarcation between the enemy and ourselves but achieved a great deal in our work.[48]

Fundamentally, two ideological tones can be detected from these two quotations, that is, nationalism and class struggle. While the former is rooted in the narrative of anti-imperialism,[49]

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[48] Mao Tse-tung, *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung*, 185, 15.

[49] As mentioned in Chapter One, modern China's turbulent history and sense of cultural inferiority to the West historically planted seeds for a rise of nationalism after the establishment of the PRC. Further influenced by the atmosphere of the Cold War, Red China maintained an antagonistic attitude toward the Western world and lapsed into a nationalism condensed in the slogan of 超英赶美, literally "surpassing the UK and the US."

one of the dominant themes of modern Chinese history, the latter is inseparable from the doctrine of Marxism-Leninism, the most prominent intellectual resource of Maoism. In general, these two ideological concepts constitute the keynotes on the basis of which the contributors to *Chinese People Are Not Allowed to Be Insulted* develop their critical ideas. As one of the critics, Zhong Kewen, indicates, "every shot exposes the filmmaker's stance; every perspective and chiaroscuro signify the director's thought and sentiment. Every cinematic strategy is dedicated to a certain political target. In *Chung Kuo*, Antonioni made his anti-revolutionary commentary precisely by means of those reactionary techniques."[50] In respect to this semiotic politics of *Chung Kuo*, I would like to illustrate with the following three examples from the booklet.

To begin with, in "A Vicious Motive, Despicable Tricks," the commentator of *People's Daily* makes the following criticism against Antonioni's cinematic visualization of Chinese cities:

> In total disregard of the tremendous changes that have taken place in China's cities, the film depicts Peking as "still an ancient city" with "very simple and poor" housing and urbanization discouraged. It describes Soochow as showing "little difference from what it was at the time of its distant origin," while the changes in Shanghai are presented as limited to the old houses in the concessions built by "Western economic empire" turned into the "office buildings of today."[51]

On the ideological level, the author's aversion to Antonioni's emphasis on Chinese antiquities stems from the progressive tendency of communism. According to orthodox Marxism, communist society is supposed to be the most advanced social form, after having evolved in the

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[50] Zhong Kewen, "Debunking the Anti-China Clown's Dirty Tricks," in *Chinese People Are Not Allowed to Be Insulted – Repudiating Antonioni's Anti-China Film Chung Kuo*, 117.

[51] *Renmin Ribao* Commentator, *A Vicious Motive, Despicable Tricks – A Criticism of Antonioni's Anti-China Film Chung Kuo* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1974), 6.

trajectory of primitive society, slave society, feudal society, and capitalist society. In Red China, this progressivism gave birth to a hierarchical understanding of cultures, which was historically embodied in the controversial movement of "destroying the Four Olds."[52] From this perspective, the author's censure of the documentary can be understood as a reaction to Antonioni's emphases on China's colonial and traditional vestiges. While the former collides with the Chinese ideology of nationalism, the latter, symbolizing an inferior condition of history, conflicts with the CPC's ideal advancement driven by class struggle. In other words, Antonioni's observational commentary unintentionally violates the "political correctness" of Red China. Therefore, *Chung Kuo*'s portrait of Chinese cities constitutes a visual text that entails a cultural misunderstanding on the semiotic level: what Antonioni represents in the name of objectivity is perceived by the Chinese authorities as a vicious defamation. In *Chinese People Are Not Allowed to Be Insulted*, discursive clashes of this kind occur in every article.

Figure 3.32. "Senior Citizens Drinking Tea in the Huxinting Teahouse." *Chung Kuo*.

[52] As the summaries of feudalistic culture, the Four Olds include old customs, old culture, old habits, and old ideas. During the Cultural Revolution, they were considered to be responsible for China's backwardness and needed to be eliminated in the name of proletarian revolution.

A second example of the semiotic politics in the dispute over *Chung Kuo* can be found in Chu Lan's article, "Considering the Anti-China Film *Chung Kuo* from the Perspective of Antonioni's Personality":

> With the purpose of insulting Chinese people, Antonioni filmed a scene which presents a group of senior citizens drinking tea in the Huxinting Teahouse in Shanghai (Figure 3.32). It should have been a clean and bright scenario teeming with leisure, but he intentionally made it gloomy and cold, accompanied by offensive comments such as "The atmosphere is strange" and "The recollections of the past mingle with the confidence in the present." In essence, what he did is nothing but imposing his imperialist mentality on our Chinese people. Antonioni alleged that his work "aims to observe people's internal world" and that he advocated an "internal neorealism." However, his so-called "recollections of the past" is by no means the internal world of Chinese people, but the imperialist's wicked heart dedicated to restoring China's colonial state. Therefore, his "internal neorealism" signifies not so much an "observation of people's internal world" as a self-expression of his filthy mind.[53]

In this case, the location of Shanghai serves as a cardinal point for the commentator's opinions. Once known as the "Paris of the East," Shanghai experienced a golden age between its inception as a commercial port in 1842 and the establishment of the PRC in 1949. Throughout the century, the city witnessed a monumental boom that was largely owing to its history of colonization. With the advent of Red China, Shanghai kept its standing as the most industrialized and populous Chinese city, but its dynamism, on both the economic and cultural levels, was notably repressed by the institutional limitations of communism. This context provides the foundation for Chu Lan's critical interpretation of the scene in the teahouse. Specifically, Antonioni's identity as a Westerner and his stress on Shanghai's eminent past unintentionally triggered the Chinese authorities' nationalistic sentiments. In the booklet, Chu Lan's attitude is shared by other authors,

[53] Chu Lan, "Considering the Anti-China Film *Chung Kuo* from the Perspective of Antonioni's Personality," in *Chinese People Are Not Allowed to Be Insulted – Repudiating Antonioni's Anti-China Film Chung Kuo*, 18.

encapsulated by Yi Da and Ying Xiao's denunciation of Antonioni as an "anti-China, anti-communism, anti-revolutionary clown in the disguise of a leftist."[54]

On the international level, Chu Lan's rebuke of Antonioni's "imperialist mentality" was also precipitated by the strained Sino-Soviet relations of the day. In 1971, the USSR's Central Studio for Documentary Film produced a movie titled *Night over China – the Grandeur and Folly of China's Fallen Revolution*. In this work, the Soviets severely criticized Chinese communism and made a serious indictment of Mao's failed social plan. For this purpose, the Soviet authorities drew on Antonioni's documentary, highlighting those images that the Chinese critics found fault with for portraying their country as backward. This attitude aroused the Maoist hard-liners' counterimpulse in the name of anti-imperialism. In part, the Chinese stigmatization of Antonioni as an imperialist was a reactive operation against the Soviet Union's condemnation. In other words, Antonioni became a scapegoat caught up in the ideological clash between the PRC and the USSR. This international factor, far beyond Antonioni's knowledge and imagination, historically contributed to the cultural misunderstanding between the Italian director and communist China.

My last example concerning the semiotic dimension of the controversy over *Chung Kuo* centers on the concept of class struggle. In *Chinese People Are Not Allowed to Be Insulted*, the headlined essay "A Vicious Motive, Despicable Tricks" objects to Antonioni's "reactionary visualization" from the perspective of the Chinese authorities:

> With regard to the selection or cutting of scenes, and how to handle them, he took few or none at all of the good, new, and progressive ones, or took some of them as a gesture at the time he was shooting but finally cut them out. On the other hand, he grabbed inferior,

[54] Yi Da and Ying Xiao, "Contemptible Cinematography," in *Chinese People Are Not Allowed to Be Insulted – Repudiating Antonioni's Anti-China Film Chung Kuo*, 109.

> old and backward scenes and took as many and as detailed shots of them as possible. Not a single new lathe, tractor, decent-looking school, construction site seething with activity, or a rich harvest scene… appears in the film.[55]

The Chinese expected *Chung Kuo* to lay emphasis on the new achievement that communism had brought to the country. On the ideological level, this wish was rooted in the Marxist doctrine of social progressivism. Specifically, Marx's historical materialism considers communism to be a superior means of production in comparison to capitalism. On this basis, Chinese communism's ideology of class struggle historically induced a cultural progressivism that aspired to advancement and abhorred traditionality. Thus, Antonioni's negligence of "new things," which symbolize advanced productivity in Marxist terms, was taken by the CPC as a negation of Chinese communism's political legitimacy. Moreover, the film's notable representation of "those that were bad, old, or backward" also aroused Red China's ideological protest in the name of class struggle: "in *Chung Kuo*, the Chinese revolution disappears, so does the great transformation brought by the revolution and the glorious image of 'new China.' What the audience sees, however, is nothing but an antiquated 'old China.'"[56] In sum, the notion of class struggle, along with that of nationalism, constitutes the semiotic basis for the cultural misunderstanding between Antonioni and his Chinese critics. Next, I will analyze the critique of *Chung Kuo* by focusing on the aesthetic specificity of documentary film. By exposing the discrepancy between Antonioni's and the Chinese critics' conceptions of realism, my goal is to

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[55] *Renmin Ribao* Commentator, *A Vicious Motive, Despicable Tricks – A Criticism of Antonioni's Anti-China Film Chung Kuo*, 11.

[56] Chu Lan, "Considering the Anti-China Film *Chung Kuo* from the Perspective of Antonioni's Personality," 16-17.

reveal the artistic dimension of the dispute over *Chung Kuo* and further consider this event in the framework of politics and aesthetics.

Throughout Antonioni's film career, *Chung Kuo* stands out as his most prominent documentary work. Dedicated to revealing the "human landscape" of communist China, Antonioni celebrated the revelatory prowess of the documentary and offered an exceptional interpretation of cinematic realism. However, the director's Chinese critics, who had limited knowledge of the documentary genre, denounced his cinematography as "a disgraceful behavior of imperialist cultural spy."[57] In *Chinese People Are Not Allowed to Be Insulted*, this censure can be represented by Su Xiangdong's comment on the crew's experience in Suzhou:

> After Antonioni arrived in Suzhou, he immediately proposed to document his so-called "interpersonal relations" with an axe to grind. Specifically, he wanted to film scenes such as a wedding, a funeral, and even a staged dispute. After we declined these unreasonable demands, he persisted to carry them out by cheap means of secret filming and fabricating scenarios. Thus, images such as a blind person crossing the street, a patient being transported to the hospital, and a sluggish senior citizen all became targets of his representation.[58]

On the one hand, Su holds a moralized opinion on the portrait of Red China, sustained by his displeasure with Antonioni's presentation of those "disgraceful" daily scenes. This critical attitude, as previously discussed, has roots in the Chinese ideologies of nationalism and class struggle during the Cultural Revolution. On the other hand, Su's criticism exposes his ignorance about the key aesthetic of documentary as a genre, that is, documentary realism based on the technique of reenactment.

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[57] Chu Lan, "Considering the Anti-China Film *Chung Kuo* from the Perspective of Antonioni's Personality," 20.

[58] Su Xiangdong, "The Wheel of History Will Never Reverse," in *Chinese People Are Not Allowed to Be Insulted – Repudiating Antonioni's Anti-China Film Chung Kuo*, 155.

Since the inception of documentary, numerous filmmakers endeavored to explore the expressivity of this genre by attaching theatrical elements to visual representation. As a primary example, Robert Flaherty, recognized as the "father of documentary," massively reenacted living scenes of an Inuit family in his ethnographic film *Nanook of the North* (1922). As Erik Barnouw points out, "Flaherty had by now absorbed this machinery of the fiction film, but he was applying it to material not invented by a writer or director, nor performed by actors. Thus drama, with its potential for emotional impact, was wedded to something more real-people being themselves."[59] To some degree, it is this balance between actuality and reenactment that constitutes the realist quality of documentary film. In Bill Nichols's words, "documentary realism negotiates the compact we strike between text and historical referent, minimizing resistance or hesitation to the claims of transparency and authenticity."[60] This realist rendition is further described by Michael Renov as a "crucible effect" in which "reality is subjected to the heat and pressure of the creative imagination – the passage of truth through fiction."[61] On the conceptual level, this aesthetic of documentary realism is beyond Su's domain of knowledge and thus begets his accusation against *Chung Kuo*. Interestingly, Antonioni himself also reflected on this issue:

> I remember that once, in Suchow [Suzhou], I wanted to film a wedding scene. The interpreter answered that, in those days, at Suchow, nobody was getting married. "All I need is a boy and a girl," I said, "to reconstruct a wedding scene." So the interpreter replied that in those days at Suchow, nobody was getting married. I insisted that all I needed was for them to pretend to get married. But he concluded that it was not right that

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[59] Barnouw, *Documentary: A History of the Non-fiction Film*, 39.

[60] Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*, 165.

[61] Michael Renov, introduction to *Theorizing Documentary*, ed. Michael Renov (New York: Routledge, 1993), 6.

> they pretend to get married given that they were not getting married. This is why, in the film, you do not see a Chinese marriage scene. None of the documentary scenes was created with closed-studio criteria. Maybe the interpreter was simply naive, but I wanted to remember this small incident because it seems typical of the importance that one can give to the image and how it can be captured. The Chinese have a very earthly, concrete, visible idea of reality.[62]

Basically, the cause of conflict between Antonioni and the Chinese critics arose from the bilateral conception of realism. As mentioned in Chapter One, cinematic realism goes beyond the level of objective visualization and commits to revealing the potential dynamism of reality that originates from artistic manipulation. It is out of this motive that Antonioni requested the reenactment of a wedding, with the purpose of presenting a more complete image of communist China. In his own words, "I do not believe that the documentary would be closer to reality if 'pre-established' scenes were absent."[63] However, Su had little knowledge about the aesthetic of realism and the theatrical dimension of documentary and therefore disapproved of Antonioni's demand based on his "earthly, concrete, visible idea of reality." In this regard, Susan Sontag's insight is highly illuminating:

> While for us photography is intimately connected with discontinuous ways of seeing (the point is precisely to see the whole by means of a part – an arresting detail, a striking way of cropping), in China it is connected only with continuity. Not only are there proper subjects for the camera, those which are positive, inspirational (exemplary activities, smiling people, bright weather), and orderly, but there are proper ways of photographing, which derive from notions about the moral order of space that preclude the very idea of photographic seeing. Thus Antonioni was reproached for photographing things that were old, or old-fashioned…[64]

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[62] Antonioni, "Is It Still Possible to Film a Documentary?", 114.

[63] Ibid., 110.

[64] Susan Sontag, "The Image-world," in *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 2001), 169-70.

Indeed, the Chinese sense of reality not only features a temporal continuity but also implies a moral norm that regulates the artistic presentation of society. This peculiar aesthetics has roots in the Soviet tradition of socialist realism, which, as summarized by Boris Groys, "represents the party-minded, collective surrealism that flourished under Lenin's famous slogan 'it is necessary to dream.'"[65] Based on certain ideological codes, socialist realism entails a partisan aesthetics in recognition of the political sublimity of communist revolution. In this framework, *Chung Kuo*'s documentary realism, implemented through the reenactment of observational footage, constitutes an ethical imperfection that triggered China's suspicion and criticism. It is this schism between documentary realism and socialist realism that plants seeds for the Chinese critics' censure of Antonioni and his portrait of the PRC. Beyond the technical level, this conflict between art and politics further induces the third dimension of the dispute over *Chung Kuo*, that is, the ritualized aesthetics of Red China.

In response to the Chinese attack on Antonioni, Luciano Tovoli, the chief cameraman of *Chung Kuo*, offers an incisive observation: "we didn't meet the expectation of the Chinese officials, and that's why the film became controversial. *Chung Kuo* manifests a plain China, a China of the Chinese people. It didn't follow their anticipated sense of ritual."[66] At this point, he indicates the fundamental reason for *Chung Kuo*'s flaws in the eyes of the Chinese authorities,

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[65] Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, trans. Charles Rougle (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 52.

[66] Luciano Tovoli, "We are the Witnesses of China 1972," in *Michelangelo Antonioni and China*, ed. Hou Yujing and Liu Haiping (Chongqing, CN: Chongqing University Press, 2013), 71.

that is, the lack of ritualization. Regarding this ritualized aesthetics, a Chinese critic under the name of The Guard Company of Tiananmen Square provides a classic example:

> The glory of Tiananmen Square is so impressive. To the north, the rostrum of Tiananmen majestically stands, and its red walls further foreground its solemnity and serenity. Looking up to the rostrum from the Golden Water Bridge, the portrait of Chairman Mao appears kind and amiable, and the national emblem of the PRC dazzles with brilliance. To the south, the Monument to the People's Heroes towers into the clouds, and the Five-Starred Red Flag flies against the wind. On the east and west sides of the square, the Great Hall of the People and the museums of Chinese revolution and Chinese history stand with magnificence… However, in *Chung Kuo*, we can see neither the panorama of the square nor the majestic appearance of the rostrum. What's more, a sunny day in May is portrayed as dim and dark, and the grand square looks so disorganized that one may possibly recognize it as a cluttered bazaar. Do these result from Antonioni's negligence or special taste? Certainly not. This is a vicious and despicable method which stems from an anti-China imperialist's extreme hatred against Chinese revolution and intense hostility toward Chinese people.[67]

In this passage, the first half represents China's ritualized discourse about Tiananmen Square. Words such as "glory," "majestically," "brilliance," "towers into the clouds," and "magnificence" are all typical words in communist China's official paperwork and textbooks. On the ideological level, they symbolize a semantic sublimity that expresses the political progressiveness of Chinese communism. As Rey Chow indicates, "for Antonioni's Chinese audience, realism has to do with an aesthetic-cum-political arrangement, whereby signifiers such as a body must be carefully anchored to a desired signified."[68] In other words, the Chinese sense of realism during the Cultural Revolution is not so much a truthful representation as a ritualized manifestation, given that aesthetic signifiers are bound to be entailed by certain political signified. Historically,

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[67] The Guard Company of Tiananmen Square, "It is not Allowed to Insult Tiananmen," in *Chinese People Are Not Allowed to Be Insulted – Repudiating Antonioni's Anti-China Film Chung Kuo*, 63-64.

[68] Chow, "China as Documentary: Some Basic Questions (Inspired by Michelangelo Antonioni and Jia Zhangke)," 22.

this cultural institution has roots in the Confucian creed of ritual propriety, which contends that beauty should be based on moral goodness so that human nature can be possibly improved by means of artistic appreciation.[69] Through the lens of this politicized aesthetic, Antonioni's portrait of Tiananmen Square seems to be too real to meet the Chinese critics' ideological expectation and thus incurred a dispute over its deficiency in sublimity. In this respect, the Chinese writer Hao Ran's following criticism of *Chung Kuo* manifests itself as a more symptomatic example.[70]

In his critique titled "The Wings of a Fly Cannot Cover the Bright Sunshine," Hao Ran blames *Chung Kuo* from an artist's perspective:

> We, workers of revolutionary literature, have been excited by the deeds of heroes from time to time. Even though we had thousands of pens in our hands, we would have never exhausted these legends. However, in *Chung Kuo*, our wonderful revolutionary life and heroic figures are absolutely twisted. Through Antonioni's lens, the socialist New China, which is bathed in sunlight, looks not only dim but also dilapidated. And the spirited Chinese people are portrayed as a benighted and insensitive mass. So contemptible is his technique![71]

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[69] The following analects of Confucius may testify to this proposition: "Be stimulated by the *Odes*, take your stand through the help of the rites, and be perfected by music." "Do not look unless it is in accordance with the rites; do not listen unless it is in accordance with the rites; do not speak unless it is in accordance with the rites; do not move unless it is in accordance with the rites." Throughout Chinese history, this Confucian concept of ritualized aesthetics has been widely practiced by China's central governments since the Han Dynasty. Even though Maoist China held an anti-Confucian attitude, it still maintained this cultural institution under the cover of communism.

[70] As the only author who published novels during the Cultural Revolution, Hao Ran is regarded as the most notable Chinese novelist and the most typical ideological writer in Mao's times.

[71] Hao Ran, "The Wings of a Fly Cannot Cover the Bright Sunshine," in *Chinese People Are Not Allowed to Be Insulted – Repudiating Antonioni's Anti-China Film Chung Kuo*, 70.

Hao Ran's commentary rests on an aesthetic principle of the Cultural Revolution, which is generally summarized as "lofty, big, and perfect." Historically, this doctrine was rooted in Mao's programmatic document, "Talks at the Yenan Forum on Literature and Art." Highlighting the concept of "literature and art in the service of workers, peasants, and soldiers," Mao celebrates the fact that "our writings should help [the people] to unite, to make progress, to press ahead with one heart and one mind, to discard what is backward and develop what is revolutionary, and should certainly not do the opposite."[72] Essentially, this proposition underlines art's populist significance and advocates an ideological glorification of the Chinese revolution. From C. T. Hsia's perspective, Mao's understanding of art inherently embodies an aesthetic optimism: "communist art is by definition optimistic: the celebration of past and present Communist glories and the promise of an even greater future."[73] Based on this Maoist keynote, the Gang of Four further formulated the principle of "lofty, big, and perfect," in order to discipline the artistic creation of Red China. In this framework, images and figures are supposed to be not only politically correct but also morally glorious, exemplified by Hao Ran's own works such as *Sunny Days* (1964) and *The Golden Road* (1972). By contrast, the visual language of *Chung Kuo* is mainly in the representational mode and fails to ritualize certain images based on the aesthetic conventions of China. Therefore, it is safe to conclude that the clash between the Chinese ritualized aesthetics and Antonioni's documentary realism was largely responsible for the controversy over *Chung Kuo*.

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[72] Mao Tse-tung, "Talks at the Yenan Forum on Literature and Art," in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, *Vol. III* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1965), 71.

[73] C. T. Hsia, *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), 474.

To sum up, cultural misunderstanding, the schism between documentary realism and socialist realism, and the ritualized aesthetics of Red China constitute the three major perspectives from which *Chung Kuo* can be unraveled on the hermeneutic level: the cinematic text and the real incident dramatically intertwine and further beget an intertextuality of film and history. It is in this sense that I consider *Chung Kuo* as a Badiouian "event" that challenges our logical norm and invites us to rethink our conception of the world. Between Antonioni's "love" for China and the Chinese critics' condemnation of *Chung Kuo*, what we witness is not only an intrinsic tension between left-wing politics and left-wing aesthetics but also an ethical dilemma of cross-cultural representation.

In 2004, three years before Antonioni's death, *Chung Kuo* was finally allowed by the Chinese authorities to be publicly shown at Beijing Film Academy. In the same year, a Chinese couple, Hou Yujing and Liu Haiping, visited Antonioni in Italy and shot a documentary entitled "China Is Far Away: Antonioni and *Chung Kuo*." In this film, the Italian director made an ardent retrospect of his China trip and expressed his grievance against the Chinese criticism of *Chung Kuo*. When being asked whether he would like to go back to China, Antonioni burst into tears and said, *"Andiamo, subito!"* ("Let's go, right now!").[74]

[74] Hou Yujing and Liu Haiping, "Two Young People, Two Dreams," in *Michelangelo Antonioni and China*, ed. Hou Yujing and Liu Haiping (Chongqing, CN: Chongqing University Press, 2013), 97.

CHAPTER 4

THE NATION OF YUKONG AND MULAN:

JORIS IVENS'S LIFELONG FASCINATION WITH RED CHINA

A controversial figure in film history, Joris Ivens devoted his artistic career to the international communist movement of the twentieth century. As one of the most acclaimed documentarists of all time, he traveled through many Third World countries and made a series of movies featuring their struggles for independence and liberty. Among these works, four China-related films stand out for their relevance to my dissertation topic: *The 400 Million* (1938), *Before Spring/Letters from China* (1958), *How Yukong Moved the Mountains* (1976), and *A Tale of the Wind* (1988). Spanning half a century, these works not only exhibit Ivens's deep sentiment toward China but also constitute a documentary narrative of modern Chinese history by focusing on the four crucial phases of modern China: those of the Second Sino-Japanese War, the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, and the period of "reform and opening-up." Specifically, *The 400 Million*, whose name refers to China's population of the day, portrays Chinese people's resistance against the Japanese invasion during WWII. Combining poetry and politics, *Before Spring/Letters from China* is a cinematic endorsement of the CPC's communist revolution. Composed of twelve separate films, *How Yukong Moved the Mountains* offers a comprehensive representation of China in the latter half of the Cultural Revolution. Blending realist and imaginary elements, *A Tale of the Wind* is a concentrated expression of Ivens's China complex and serves as the summation of the director's artistic life.

In this chapter, I will investigate Ivens's China-related documentaries on both aesthetic and political levels. The first section delineates Ivens's "solidarity film" and his first two movies

about China, *The 400 Million* and *Letters from China/Before Spring*. Through the conceptual lens of intertextuality, the second section explores the hermeneutic connections among Ivens's documentary, the ancient Chinese allegory, and Mao's renowned essay, all of which share the title of *How Yukong Moved the Mountains*. Adopting a feminist perspective, the third section examines Ivens's filmic observations on Chinese women under the communist regime. With a concentration on *A Tale of the Wind*, the last section is dedicated to Ivens's nostalgic fantasy about China in his twilight years. Throughout this chapter, I will situate Ivens's documentary works in the context of twentieth-century Chinese revolution, with the purpose of unraveling the relationship between left-wing politics and left-wing aesthetics from a historical point of view.

4.1. Ivens and Solidarity Film: An Aesthetic Means to a Political End

In parallel with Robert Flaherty, John Grierson, and Dziga Vertov, Joris Ivens is regarded as one of the most significant pioneers of documentary film. Born into a Dutch family in 1898, he familiarized himself with film in his father's chain of camera shops. Despite his bourgeois origins, Ivens displayed an uncanny interest in the lives of the disadvantaged and oppressed since early childhood, which can be proved by the following anecdote from his memoir: "our favorite game was Indians, played on the hills outside town. At eleven my favorite books were about Indians, books by James Fenimore Cooper and Karl May. The latter, a German writer who had never been in America, wrote about 'good' Indians exclusively. That was what we preferred."[1] In the context of 1909 Europe, this fondness for native American culture was quite unusual, given that Eurocentrism was in its heyday and that native Americans still lived under discriminatory conditions. From this point of view, it can be said that in his early childhood,

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[1] Joris Ivens, *The Camera and I* (New York: International Publishers, 1969), 14.

Ivens cherished a profound sympathy for the poor and downtrodden. To some degree, it was this compassionate sentiment that planted seeds for his left-wing tendency and his cinematic life associated with the Third World revolution.

In 1917, Ivens was sent to the Rotterdam College of Economics, where he became a member of the school's leftist student organization. Two years later, he transferred to the University of Charlottenburg in Germany to study photography, before he dropped out and went to work in camera factories in Dresden and Jena. In this period, his left-wing tendency became even more pronounced:

> I began to understand physically what it meant to be a worker, living within a small salary and working within a huge organization. In the state of Saxony, the labor unions were having a tough struggle for existence. The justice of their minimum demands was clear to me. I marched in demonstrations in the streets of Dresden when the protesting workers were shot at by the police. I knew and felt strongly that the workers were in the right. They were fighting the first German battles against fascism.[2]

Apparently, young Ivens showed a great sympathy for the working class and identified himself with the proletariat notwithstanding his bourgeois background. As L. J. Jordaan sees it, "this proletarian sentiment is not a matter of political views – it is a matter of inclination, of instinct, of becoming aware by his close relationship to the German proletariat. It gives his oeuvre that striking simplicity, that clarity and straightforwardness."[3] Indeed, from his ingenuous compassion for native Americans to his conscious empathy for German workers, what we witness is Ivens's instinctual concern for the lives of others and his visceral resistance to the institution of capitalism. It was based on this left-wing sentiment that Ivens transformed himself

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[2] Ibid., 17-18.

[3] L. J. Jordaan, *Joris Ivens* (Mechelen, BE: De Spieghel, 1931), 7.

into the Flying Dutchman and started his artistic career dedicated to the working class and Third World countries.[4]

Before embarking on political film, Ivens sharpened his cinematography by creating avant-garde films such as *Bridge* (1928) and *Rain* (1929). Going beyond the concept of "art for art's sake," Ivens soon recognized the political significance of cinema and deemed the documentary a vital means to social intervention: "I think a pure aesthetic approach will bring film to an artistic dead end. I consider a film to be much more important if it is connected with a social movement, if it has to do with life."[5] In 1929, he was asked to make a movie about the 25th anniversary of the Dutch building workers' trade union, and he was absolutely thrilled with this invitation:

> Here it was. Somebody really needed my work. Here was a chance to give my work direction, purpose, fighting qualities and here was also an opportunity to devote my whole time to film making… The central theme was the professional pride of the building workers. This was really the old guild idea: the pride and importance of a man who works with his hands, who builds factories, homes, schools and dams. The pride of labor in itself, in its results and its function in society, and the feeling of dignity, solidarity, and force that comes through that pride.[6]

For the 31-year-old Ivens, this project brought him a sense of achievement, because it combined artistic enterprise with political initiative and offered him an opportunity to probe into reality through the cinematic lens. In his own words, "if we see our task as artist in this way and if we

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[4] Originating from seventeenth-century nautical folklore, the Flying Dutchman refers to a ghost ship that can never make port and is destined to drift forever. Ivens was given this nickname because of his long-time overseas life and his being subject to inadmissibility by his home country, the Netherlands.

[5] Joris Ivens, "Documentary: Subjectivity and Montage," in *Joris Ivens and the Documentary Context*, 251.

[6] Ivens, *The Camera and I*, 43-44.

want to take part in the progress of humanity, then we must make honest appraisals of reality in order to fully comprehend our attitude toward that reality and the society we are living in."[7] In this progressive spirit, Ivens visited the Soviet Union in 1929 and later produced two proletarian documentaries, *Zuidezee* (1930) and *Misery in Borinage* (1933). While the former is a portrait of Dutch workers' heroic achievement of sea reclamation, the latter describes Belgian coal miners' tragic lives and their struggles against capitalist exploitation. In these productions, Ivens laid aesthetic foundations for his characteristic "solidarity film," which can be defined by his following statement: "after informing and moving audiences, it should agitate-mobilize them to become active in connection with the problems shown in the film."[8] Based on this leftist agency of cinema, Ivens set forth on his journey as the Flying Dutchman of twentieth-century world revolution. In 1937, he teamed up with Ernest Hemingway in creating *The Spanish Earth*. Epitomizing "solidarity film," this movie offered a provocative representation of the Spanish Civil War and aroused international concerns in support of anti-fascism. The next year, Ivens traveled to China and produced *The 400 Million*, which not only publicized the Chinese people's war of resistance against the Japanese invasion but also initiated his long-term engagement with China and its revolution.[9]

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[7] Joris Ivens, "Film and Progress," in *Joris Ivens and the Documentary Context*, 273.

[8] Ivens, *The Camera and I*, 137.

[9] The connection between *The Spanish Earth* and *The 400 Million* can be proved by Ivens's following statement: "from the viewpoint of straight coverage of historic events, the Chinese film was the logical sequel to the Spanish film. Friends in New York and I felt that it was the same kind of fight: the people's war in Spain against an aggressor, and the people's war in China against Japan." (*The Camera and I*, 141)

As Thomas Waugh summarizes, *The 400 Million* is a work "halfway between Hollywood and newsreel."[10] Indeed, during the arduous period of WWII, this project was aimed at reporting China's anti-fascist campaign in a dramatic way, so that the audience might familiarize themselves with the situation of the Chinese battlefield and enhance their solidarity in resistance to the Axis. This intention is explicitly announced in the opening caption of the film: "the war in the Far East is no isolated conflict between China and Japan. It is a struggle involving one fifth of the world's population, and one whose outcome will have tremendous importance in the history of mankind…. Europe and Asia have become the Western and Eastern front of the same assault on democracy."[11] With an emphasis on coalition, what Ivens yearns for is to situate the Western viewers in a communal atmosphere and inspire their will to fight for the peace of all humanity.

The first section of *The 400 Million* documents the Japanese atrocities committed in Eastern China. Among numerous footages, Ivens highlights two visions with Chinese women as protagonists. In Figure 4.1, a woman is grieving over her lost husband while carrying her baby in her bosom. Her extreme lamentation, foregrounded by the indifferent bystanders, constitutes a powerful image in arousing the audience's sympathy for Chinese people's wartime miseries. In Figure 4.2, another woman is crawling to flee from the war zone. In contrast to other evacuees who escape with their essential belongings, her destitute condition and physical inconvenience encourage the viewers to visualize her previous misfortunes. Along with these westward

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[10] Thomas Waugh, "*The 400 Million* (1938) and the Solidarity Film: 'Halfway between Hollywood and Newsreel'," *Studies in Documentary Film* 3, no. 1 (2009), 7.

[11] *The 400 Million*, directed by Joris Ivens and John Ferno (1938; Sherman Oaks, CA: Sling Shot Entertainment, 2000), DVD.

fugitives, Ivens naturally switches his representational focus to the interior of China. After a historical retrospect on the site of the Tang Tombs close to Xi'an, he finally dwells on the Nationalist government's modernizing movement featuring industrialization and infrastructure constructions. Combined with the earlier depiction of Chinese people's sufferings, the first half of *The 400 Million* presents a cohesive China dedicated to its self-improvement and self-defense. What Western audiences perceive, through the panoramic lens of China during WWII, is an ethical calling to support Chinese people in their national development as well as struggles against the Japanese invasion.

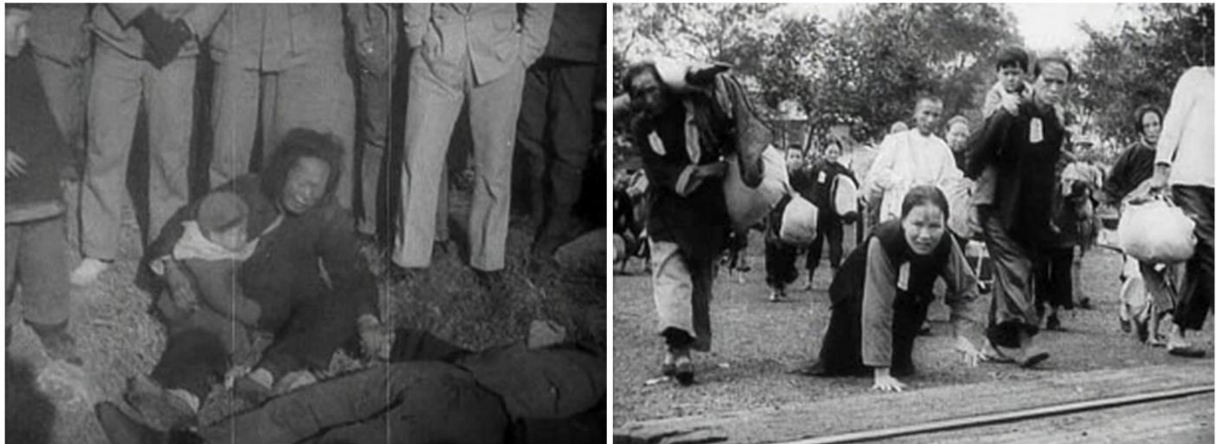

Figure 4.1. "Woman Grieving over Her Lost Husband." *The 400 Million*, directed by Joris Ivens and John Ferno (1938; Sherman Oaks, CA: Sling Shot Entertainment, 2000), DVD. (left)
Figure 4.2. "Woman Crawling to Flee from the East." *The 400 Million*. (right)

In the latter part of the film, Ivens exposes a little-known fact at that time, that is, the United States had served as a major raw material supplier for fascist Japan since the inception of the war. Not only did this revelation challenge the mainstream knowledge of the day, it also brought moral and political disputes over Ivens, who was himself a US-based filmmaker. Nine years after the production of *The 400 Million*, Ivens directed *Indonesia Calling* (1946), which documented the Australian dockers' strike against the Dutch ships heading to Indonesia with the

purpose of repressing the country's independence movement. Owing to these two movies, Ivens was not only blacklisted by the FBI but also had his Dutch passport seized by his government for the sake of monitoring his activity. At the cost of becoming a Flying Dutchman, it was this selfless sentiment that laid the foundation for Ivens's lifetime career in support of Third World countries' anti-colonial struggles and social revolutions. As Erik Barnouw comments, "Ivens had moved on into a time when film makers, surrounded by the rumble of explosions, would not be asked to probe issues, but to sound the call to action."[12]

In the latter half of *The 400 Million*, Ivens further manifested his left-wing tendency by highlighting the CPC's contribution to the Anti-Japanese War, although he was advised by Soong Mei-ling, the First Lady of China at that time, to focus only on the Nationalist Army's role in the War of Resistance. In fact, Ivens even gave the movie camera with which he filmed *The 400 Million* to Wu Yinxian, a Chinese filmmaker affiliated with the CPC, and expected the latter to use it for documenting the scenes of Yan'an, the base of Chinese Communist revolution back then. In 1938, Wu brought this movie camera to Yan'an and initiated the Yan'an Film Ensemble, which later developed into China's Central Newsreel and Documentary Film Studio (CNDF). This event shows that Ivens and the CPC had already established their intimate relationship even before the official establishment of the PRC. In 1958, twenty years after the production of *The 400 Million*, the CNDF invited Ivens to revisit China and document its new look under the communist regime. It was this invitation that begot the Flying Dutchman's second film about China, which was originally named *Letters from China* by Ivens and was later screened under the

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[12] Barnouw, *Documentary: A History of the Non-fiction Film*, 139.

title of *Before Spring* at the suggestion of the Chinese playwright and Deputy Minister of Culture, Xia Yan.

At the beginning of *Letters from China/Before Spring*, Ivens presents an enthusiastic statement: "in 1958, the Great Leap Forward dramatically transformed China in all aspects. During the production of this film, I had a strong feeling that a great historical period was on the horizon!"[13] These remarks show that the director has a robust identification with Chinese communism and admires its achievement in social construction. Historically, this expectation for the PRC was related to the collapse of Stalinism in 1956 and served as a spiritual compensation for Ivens's disappointment with the USSR.

Blending Ivens's poetic style and political stance, *Letters from China/Before Spring* consists of three documentaries filmed in the Hulunbuir grasslands of Inner Mongolia, Nanjing, and Wuxi. Besides showcasing the geographical diversity of China, they also entail a temporal dimension by featuring a seasonal change from the severe winter of North China to the budding spring of South China. On the metaphorical level, this transition embodies Ivens's optimism about communist China: under the leadership of the CPC, the nation is stepping out of impoverishment and is ushering in a burgeoning period full of vigor and vitality. Notably, *Letters from China/Before Spring* highlights the Chinese people's ambition to overcome nature and build communism for the sake of transcendence. To achieve this goal, Ivens creates visual contrasts between the environmental harshness and the human resolution to change the world. For example, in the scene of the Hulunbuir grasslands, the director offers a long take that features a camel train transporting goods in the snowstorm (Figure 4.3). From a distant point of view, the

[13] *Letters from China/Before Spring*, directed by Joris Ivens (1958), Bilibili.com.

caravan is overwhelmed by the boundless snowfield, and the herdsmen's fortitude is thus showcased to epitomize the Chinese zeal for socialist construction. Similarly, when portraying the afforestation movement in Wuxi, Ivens presents a newly planted sapling with a vast barren hill as the background (Figure 4.4). From the hermeneutic perspective, this visual contrast not only reflects local people's determination to remodel their living environment but also symbolizes the Great Leap Forward's ambitious ideals of "transforming heaven and earth" and "surpassing the UK and the US."

Figure 4.3. "Camel Train Proceeding in the Blizzard." *Letters from China/Before Spring*, directed by Joris Ivens, Bilibili.com. (left)
Figure 4.4. "Sapling on a Barren Hill." *Letters from China/Before Spring*. (right)

Stemming from a childhood complex, Ivens maintained a lifelong faithfulness to leftism and developed his iconic cinematography of "solidarity film." From *The 400 Million* to *Letters from China/Before Spring*, he established a deep engagement with China and sympathized with the Chinese revolution through his cinematic lens. In his own words, "I believe in China – not only the Cultural Revolution but also profound things such as culture, arts, and philosophy. The philosophy of China is forever dynamic. It is truly dialectical and represents bona fide

materialism."[14] In 1971, Ivens came back to China in the company of his French wife Marceline Loridan-Ivens, who was particularly known for her monologue presented in Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin's masterpiece, *Chronicle of a Summer* (1961). With the support of the Chinese premier Zhou Enlai, the couple produced a 763-minute movie entitled *How Yukong Moved the Mountains*, which was completed in 1973 and was widely screened in China three years later. As the culmination of the Ivensian "solidarity film," this work, on the one hand, offers a visual portrait of the Chinese society during the Cultural Revolution; on the other hand, it condenses the director's revolutionary sentiment projected on China and manifests itself as a hybridity of allegory and documentary. In the next two sections, I will focus on *How Yukong Moved the Mountains* and unravel its significance based on the concepts of intertextuality and feminism, respectively.

4.2. Between Allegory and Documentary: The Intertextuality of *How Yukong Moved the Mountains*

Originally, the title of How Yukong Moved the Mountains belongs to a Chinese allegory recorded in *Liezi*, a Taoist text attributed to Lie Yukou (fl. ca. 400 BCE).[15] Literally, Yukong refers to a stubborn and foolish old man. And the story elaborates on his ambitious project to level the Taihang and Wangwu Mountains, which obstruct his townsmen's route to the outside world. When being questioned about the feasibility of manually removing two gigantic mountains, Yukong gives an eloquent answer: "though I shall die, I shall leave behind me my son, and my son's sons, and so on from generation to generation. Since these mountains can't

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[14] Ivens and Devarrieux, *Joris Ivens's Long March: Interviews with a Journalist*, 12.

[15] It has been proved that *Liezi* is a pseudograph compiled around the fourth century CE.

grow any larger, why shouldn't we be able to level them?"[16] Impressed by Yukong's resolution, the God eliminates the Taihang and Wangwu Mountains with his transcendental power, so that Yukong and his townsmen can free themselves from geographical restrictions. Basically, the allegory of "How Yukong Moved the Mountains" extols the spirit of perseverance and celebrates a humanist idea that solidarity is omnipotent. In modern times, this notion, filled with primitive materialism, coincides with the doctrine of Marxism, given that they both highlight human beings' practical agency in transforming their living conditions. As Karl Marx proclaims, "the philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it."[17] Due to this conceptual commonality, Mao Tse-tung paid special attention to the allegory of "How Yukong Moved the Mountains" and composed a seminal essay based on its motif of persistence. Officially translated as "The Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains," this article received supreme respect in Maoist China and was considered as one of Mao's "old three classics" along with "In Memory of Norman Bethune" and "Serve the People."

Historically, "The Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains" was written for the closing speech of the CPC's Seventh National Congress on 11 June 1945. At that point, the Chinese victory against the Japanese invasion was in sight, and the civil war between the communists and the Nationalists was to break out in a short time. In this provocative essay, Mao paraphrases the ancient allegory and utilizes it to interpret the Chinese situation of the day: "today, two big mountains lie like a dead weight on the Chinese people. One is imperialism, the

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[16] "How the Fool Moved Mountains," in *Ancient Chinese Fables*, trans. Yang Xianyi, Gladys Yang and Others (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2001), 5.

[17] Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), 145.

other is feudalism. The Chinese Communist Party has long made up its mind to dig them up. We must persevere and work unceasingly, and we, too, will touch God's heart. Our God is none other than the masses of the Chinese people. If they stand up and dig together with us, why can't these two mountains be cleared away?"[18] Compared with the allegorical version, Mao's essay shows three disparities. First, the Taihang and Wangwu Mountains are replaced by two metaphorical "mountains," imperialism and feudalism. In doing so, Mao subtly attributes a historical significance to the allegory and releases his political call for the social mobilization of the broad masses. Secondly, in the place of Yukong, the CPC is entitled to be the savior of the "townsmen," the Chinese nation in Mao's context. Here, the CPC's leadership is bound up with the fate of the country, and the party's political legitimacy is established with a glorious image. Finally, not only do Chinese people become the community to be saved, they also serve as the gods who fundamentally resolve their own problems. As the intermediary agency in between, the CPC is endowed with a natural affinity to the people and manifests itself as the pathfinder of the Chinese people's emancipation.

Beyond the moral of the ancient story, "The Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains" pioneers the path for a national salvation based on the ideology of populism,[19]

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[18] Mao Tse-tung, "The Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains," in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, *Vol. III*, 272.

[19] My usage of the term "populism" is based on its following significance: "the policies or principles of any of various political parties which seek to represent the interests of ordinary people, spec. of the Populists of the U.S. or Russia. Also: support for or representation of ordinary people or their views; speech, action, writing, etc., intended to have general appeal." ("populism, n.". OED Online. June 2017. Oxford University Press. http://www.oed.com.libproxy.utdallas.edu/view/Entry/147930?redirectedFrom=populism&, accessed January 01, 2018).

which is materialized by the CPC's principle of "mass line." As Julia Kristeva points out, "any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of intertextuality replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least double."[20] From this perspective, Mao's verbal rendition can be viewed as an intertextual performance that complicates the allegory's meaning on the socio-historical level. Acquainted with both the original and Maoist texts, Joris Ivens produced the documentary *How Yukong Moved the Mountains* to visualize Chinese communism and celebrate his leftist sentiment. In the following part of this section, I will examine this movie series in conjunction with its ancient and Maoist versions. Through the conceptual lens of intertextuality, my goal is to investigate Ivens's filmic interpretation of the Yukong motif and unravel his visual signification of the PRC's revolutionary populism.

As a 763-minute documentary series, *How Yukong Moved the Mountains* consists of twelve separate films, each of which unfolds Chinese society from a certain angle. For instance, *Professor Tsian* features an interview with Dr. Qian Weichang, a renowned physicist who used to study and work in Canada and the United States. During the conversation, Dr. Qian describes how the Cultural Revolution has scoured off his "bourgeois ideas" and transformed him into a proletarian "new man." Highlighting practicality over knowledge, the movie reflects the Chinese intellectual's reeducation under communism and offers a positive image of Mao's mobilization for "a deep revolution in the soul." As another example, *The Football Incident* portrays the settlement of a dispute between teachers and students over an infraction of discipline. In the

[20] Julia Kristeva, "Word, Dialogue, and Novel," in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon Roudiez, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 66.

process of filming, Ivens and Loridan-Ivens participate as interlocutors of the event, and the documentary manifests itself as an interactive representation of the Maoist concept of "criticism and self-criticism." On the ideological level, these two movies accentuate the CPC's principle of "mass line," for they both attach importance to grass roots and serve as illustrations for the party's populist guideline, "from the masses, to the masses."

Throughout *How Yukong Moved the Mountains*, Ivens gives prominence to the Chinese people's collective perseverance and praises their achievement in social constructions. Moreover, the film repeatedly alludes to the ancient and Maoist versions of Yukong, and the director thus fulfills an intertextual signification between the genre of allegory and that of documentary. Among the episodes, this aesthetic strategy first finds its demonstrations in *The Fishing Village*, where Ivens presents an ethnographic portrait of the fishermen's lives in Dayu Islet, Shandong Province. In an exhaustive conversation with the local physician, the interviewee echoes Mao's well-known criticism that "doctors are like lords in big cities" and further explains the origin and development of "barefoot doctors" as follows:

> Our country has a large population. The rural regions, especially the remote ones, need doctors and medicine. The hospitals alone can't take care of all the patients. So we ask for help from high school students, who are good workers and very willing. After they finish school, they spend certain amount of time doing manual work, then they come here. We send them to the local hospitals as apprentices, then they come back here again to practice medicine. They work, and, at the same time, they study and improve their professional skills. Even though they haven't been to the medical school, they take care of the rural population wholeheartedly. And they welcome everywhere. After a while, we send them back to the hospital again to perfect their skills. Now medical care is more accessible to the peasants. In our brigade, common illnesses are treated on the spot.[21]

[21] *The Fishing Village* in *How Yukong Moved the Mountains*, directed by Joris Ivens and Marceline Loridan-Ivens (1975; Paris: Capi Films, 1976), DVD.

Here, the intertextuality among the allegorical, Maoist, and cinematic versions is subtle yet conspicuous. Specifically, the medical scarcity in the countryside corresponds to the Taihang and Wangwu Mountains in their obstruction of Yukong and his townsmen, and the voluntary "barefoot doctors" appear as contemporary "Yukongs" who devote themselves to the well-being of the rural population. Most importantly, the subject "we," which shows up three times in the physician's account, embodies a dualistic significance on the discursive level. On the one hand, it refers to the Chinese nation, which constitutes the basis for the PRC's political legitimacy. On the other hand, it represents the CPC's practical willpower, which ultimately leads to the "removal" of the "mountains," medical scarcity in Ivens's context. In consideration of the Maoist version, the emergence of "barefoot doctors" constitutes an illustration of Mao's concept that Chinese people are their own saviors and that the CPC only plays an intermediary role in the process of national salvation. For Ivens, it is this "mass line" that lays the ideological foundation for Red China and facilitates the social construction of Chinese communism. This revolutionary populism, as the centerpiece of *How Yukong Moved the Mountains*, receives a more thorough demonstration in another episode of the film, *The Oilfields*.

In line with *The Fishing Village*'s ethnographic style, *The Oilfields* documents the legendary inception of China's "oil capital," Daqing, which literally means "great celebration" in memory of the PRC's tenth anniversary. In accordance with the allegory of Yukong, the development of Daqing stemmed from the Chinese people's resolution to change China's natural condition as an oil-poor country. Since 1959, thousands of people had left their hometowns and relocated themselves to the newly discovered Daqing Oilfield in northeastern China, and the sensational "battle of oil" commenced as an analogue of Yukong's project to level the Taihang

and Wangwu Mountains. In a way, *The Oilfields* symbolizes the Chinese will to conquer nature and improve people's well-being under the leadership of the CPC. Intertextually connected with the ancient and Maoist versions, it celebrates oil workers' dedication inspired by the CPC's revolutionary populism and manifests itself as a visual celebration in the middle of allegory and documentary.

Figure 4.5. "Oil Workers in the Vast Land." *The Oilfields* in *How Yukong Moved the Mountains*, directed by Joris Ivens and Marceline Loridan-Ivens (1975; Paris: Capi Films, 1976), DVD. (left)
Figure 4.6. "An Oil Worker Commanding a Tractor Team in the Background of a Drilling Rig." *The Oilfields* in *How Yukong Moved the Mountains*. (right)

The Oilfields starts with a visual contrast between the immensity of nature and the productivity of humankind. On the one hand, Ivens emphasizes Daqing's broad landscape in comparison to the seemingly insignificant oil workers (Figure 4.5): "the area is so vast that no camera can capture where people have come from and where they are going to. All roads seem to disappear into the horizon."[22] The juxtaposition of the extensive nature and the inconspicuous workers indicates the odds of petroleum development in this area. On the other hand, the director highlights Chinese people's transformative power by showing an image in which an oil worker

[22] *The Oilfields* in *How Yukong Moved the Mountains*.

commands a tractor team marching across the land (Figure 4.6). Foregrounded by a drilling rig, the mechanized crew visualizes China's invincible determination to conquer nature by technological means. Furthermore, Ivens deploys a long take presenting the team's dynamic advance, and the audience is given an opportunity to viscerally experience the Chinese people's overwhelming competence in constructing an "oil capital" from scratch. Through this initial contrast, the director offers a cinematic allusion to the allegorical Yukong story: the demand for oil is equivalent to the removal of the mountains, and modern technology takes over the role of the transcendental force. What's consistent in between, however, is the productive agency embedded in the Chinese people's indomitable will and persistent efforts.

From the Maoist perspective, the spirit of Yukong implies a steadfast attitude toward anti-imperialism and self-reliance. In *The Oilfields*, this import is pronounced by a petroleum engineer with the following comment: "the oil problem seems economic, but it's really political. Oil has made us politically independent."[23] In response to the Soviet Union's abrupt termination of aid, the builders of Daqing devoted themselves to China's self-sufficiency in energy and afforded the "battle of oil" a socio-historical significance: "our struggle is not just for oil, it's for our dignity too – for our political ideals, and for the dignity of the Chinese people… To build Daqing, we didn't count on the help from heaven, but on Chairman Mao's philosophy and the workers' determination. That's how we built wells where there was nothing."[24] Here, an intertextual signification related to the original and Maoist versions of Yukong is abundantly clear. As Ivens sees it, the Chinese people are now able to mold their own destiny on the

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid.

strengths of Maoism and populism. And the success of Daqing not only signifies a national dignity but also actualizes the legend of Yukong under the communist regime. On the intertextual level, *The Oilfields* constitutes a visual celebration of China's modern "Yukongs" and manifests itself as a hybrid account of allegory and documentary.

As a leftist filmmaker, Ivens displays a preference for Red China and pays tribute to its revolutionary populism in *The Oilfields*. Besides the positive portraits mentioned above, he establishes a contrast between Chinese communism and American capitalism, with the purpose of underlining the former's cultural superiority over the latter: "in America, the West was with killing, blunder, and greed. The general law was every man for himself. Daqing has chosen an entirely different approach: Daqing is a collective effort, governed by the law of the people."[25] In this comment, Ivens postulates an opposition between individualism and collectivism and further imposes a moral judgment on this dichotomy. For him, individualism is responsible for the capitalist alienation of human nature, whereas collectivism may foster a healthy humanity and lead to a progressive society in the spirit of Yukong. As the film proceeds, Ivens intensifies this ideological contrast by means of personification: "there are two different kinds of pioneers and two different legends. One is the lone cowboy from the American far West who has to rely on his own fast reflexes to survive. The other is the oil driller from Daqing, a worker who belongs to the socialist society. His strength is out of the entire group."[26] Here, what we witness is the confrontation between the American cowboy and the Chinese Yukong. While the former struggles for his survival and personal interest, the latter, by contrast, dedicates himself to the

[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid.

collective enterprise and effectuates a transcendence of individuality for the sake of the common good.

From this astute juxtaposition with its opposite outcomes, it is not hard to see that Ivens voices his opinion on Western individualism and leans toward China's collectivist mode of production. Through the intertextual lens of Yukong, *How Yukong Moved the Mountains* not only represents the Chinese way of life during the Cultural Revolution but also visualizes the CPC's populist guideline from a combined perspective of allegory and documentary. Besides the concept of collectivity, Ivens also channels his left-wing sentiment in the direction of feminism. Dissatisfied with the androcentric dominance in the West, he observes a gender egalitarianism in China and offers a thorough investigation into Chinese femininity under communism.

4.3. "Women Hold up Half of the Sky": Chinese Femininity in *How Yukong Moved the Mountains*

As an ancient civilization, China was once known for its tradition of male-chauvinism and disparagement of women. On the textual level, this hierarchy can be dated back to the Spring and Autumn Period (771 – 476 BCE), when Confucius came up with the idea that "it is the women and the small men that are difficult to deal with. If you let them get too close, they become insolent. If you keep them at a distance, they feel badly done by."[27] Since high antiquity, Chinese society had established a patriarchal structure in suppression of women's rights, which was condensed in the principle of Three Obediences and Four Virtues. Specifically, the former stipulated that a woman should obey her father as a daughter, her husband as a wife,

[27] Confucius, *The Analects*, trans. D. C. Lau (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1992), 181.

and her sons in widowhood, while the latter laid moral emphases on wifely virtue, wifely speech, wifely manner, and wifely work. Highly influential in traditional communities, these ritualistic dogmas defined Chinese femininity as "good wives and wise mothers" and imposed ethical repressions on women's individual subjectivity.

As Simone de Beauvoir points out, "what singularly defines the situation of woman is that being, like all humans, an autonomous freedom, she discovers and chooses herself in a world where men force her to assume herself as Other: an attempt is made to freeze her as an object and doom her to immanence, since her transcendence will be forever transcended by another essential and sovereign consciousness."[28] Indeed, ancient Chinese women were in a socially reified situation and exposed themselves in men's authoritative gaze and ideological manipulation. As a notorious case, the custom of foot-binding not only displayed a twisted aesthetics but also aimed to confine women's scope of activities for the sake of regulation and control. Another instance is that the convention of arranged marriage prevented women from exercising their right to freedom and independence. From the feminist perspective, Julia Kristeva criticizes Confucianism's restraint on Chinese women in the following way:

> In this order, a woman's role is as the object over whom authority is exercised. Daughters, those nomads, those perpetual strangers in the feudal and Confucian systems, are not entitled to the rite of bonding and paternal adoption. They belong to the gynoecium, and leave it only to join another household. They are subjected to the mother, insofar as she represents paternal authority; absolute piety and obedience to the family is demanded of them, and they remain forever bound to their original household because they bear its name even once they have taken on the yoke of the parents-in-law and the husband.[29]

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[28] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), 17.

[29] Julia Kristeva, *About Chinese Women*, trans. Anita Barrows (New York: Marion Boyars, 2000), 74-75.

In other words, the individuality of Chinese women was caught in the Confucian web of morals, and the popular view that "only a woman without talent is virtuous" was a testament to this stigmatized femininity. For over two thousand years, Chinese women were recognized as the dependents of men and were expected to play domestic roles such as procreation, housework, and textile. On the historical level, this predicament remained unchanged until the twentieth century when China launched a series of social movements in pursuit of individual rights and gender equality.

With the end of the Qing Dynasty (1644 – 1912), China was ushered into a modernization featuring the concepts of enlightenment and national salvation. On the one hand, the New Culture Movement celebrated Western thought and undermined Confucian values, including male dominance. On the other hand, the May Fourth Movement gave birth to the CPC, which eventually founded the PRC as an egalitarian country. Based on the improvement of women's rights during the Republican period (1912 – 1949),[30] the PRC redefined femininity on the discursive level: "in Maoist rhetoric, *funü* referred to a national subject that stood for the collectivity of all politically normative or decent women."[31] In parallel with terms such as "worker" and "peasant," *funü* was imbued with class consciousness and underwent a masculinization under the banner of proletarian revolution. In contrast to their subjugated status

[30] The improvement of women's rights during the Republican period includes coeducation, the abolishment of foot-binding, the prevalence of monogamy, the legislation of divorce, the advocacy of free love, and the political empowerment of women.

[31] Tani Barlow, *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 38. In Chinese, 女人(nüren), 女性(nüxing), 女子(nüzi), and 妇女(funü) are all expressions for "woman" with semantic emphases on the biological, the individual, the humble, and the collective, respectively. In the rest of this section, my reference to Chinese women is mostly in the mode of 妇女(funü).

in the past, Chinese women under communism were encouraged to conduct manual labor together with their male counterparts. Inspired by the Maoist slogan that "women hold up half of the sky,"[32] numerous female brigades sprang up in honor of ancient heroines such as Hua Mulan and Mu Guiying.[33] It was in this context that Ivens and Loridan-Ivens gave extensive attention to working women and conceived a new Chinese femininity by filmic means.

To some degree, *How Yukong Moved the Mountains*'s concentration on women was inseparable from the fact that Loridan-Ivens was herself a female filmmaker. Though not a declared feminist, Loridan-Ivens had the background of being a Holocaust survivor and was highly sympathetic toward marginal groups. Knowing well Chinese women's unfortunate past, she was concerned about the condition of women's rights in China and conducted a cinematic survey along with her husband.

In *The Drug Store*, Loridan-Ivens engages in an interactive conversation with one of the saleswomen. In response to the question about women's liberation in China, the interviewee smiles and says: "in principle, I can say that the problem has been resolved. Women are no longer victims as they were under the old regime, subject to marital and religious power. There might still exist some inequalities in certain couples. Women and children are not one-hundred

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[32] In 1955, Mao formulated this slogan in response to an article published by the Women's Federation of Guizhou Province, "To Practice Equal Pay for Men and Women in Cooperatives."

[33] A globally popular image, Hua Mulan is a legendary female warrior who goes to war in her aged father's place. A key figure in the legend *Generals of the Yang Family*, Mu Guiying symbolizes women's bravery and resourcefulness as being equivalent to male generals, if not better. In the Maoist era, China abounded with female brigades with Hua Mulan and Mu Guiying in their names.

percent liberated. We still need some more time to get to that stage."[34] Besides this general situation, Loridan-Ivens further conducts her inquiry by asking the lady whether she feels like a free woman. "For the most part I think so," she replied.[35] In this scene, Ivens and Loridan-Ivens present a concrete reflection on the development of women's rights in China. Through their lens, Chinese women have not only overcome the confinement of domesticity but also obtained the self-awareness of free will.

This image of female independence is further enhanced in *An Army Camp*, in which a pharmaceutical factory composed of officers' wives is highlighted. When being asked whether their wage is essential for the maintenance of family, all of them deny that and indicate that their husbands' salary is more than enough and that their will to work is purely for the sake of "transforming thinking" and "serving the people." Here, what's at stake is how communism exerts influence on the liberation of Chinese women. Specifically, the effort toward proletarian revolution induces a predominant ideology of egalitarianism. Along with the elimination of class, the social gap between the male and the female is reduced, followed by women's emancipation from the household and involvement in industrial production. In a way, this communist approach to gender equality entails a masculinization of femininity modeled on Mulan, the legendary girl who disguises herself as a man to become a soldier in ancient China. As a working woman insists in *The Oilfields*, "men have two hands to contribute to the socialist revolution, so do we. We can do as much. We must carry on the revolution like the men!"[36] Like Mulan, these female

[34] *The Drug Store* in *How Yukong Moved the Mountains*.

[35] Ibid.

[36] *The Oilfields* in *How Yukong Moved the Mountains*.

workers are committed to physical labor and devote themselves to the common interest of Chinese people. Among the episodes of *How Yukong Moved the Mountains*, this de-differentiation between genders finds its finest characterization in *The Fishing Village*.

Figure 4.7. "A Sailoress with Facial Suntan and Short Hair." *The Fishing Village* in *How Yukong Moved the Mountains*. (left)
Figure 4.8. "Female Sailors Working on the Boat." *The Fishing Village* in *How Yukong Moved the Mountains*. (right)

In this film about coastal life, Ivens gives prominence to the March Eighth Crew, a cluster of female sailors whose name commemorates the International Women's Day. In his representation, the female sailors are homogenized by the uniform and display masculine features such as facial suntan, short hair, and physical competence (Figures 4.7 and 4.8). Thrilled at this denial of sexual difference, Ivens resonates with Mao and expresses his admiration as follows: "women hold up half of the sky! Whatever men can do, women can do. Now women fish on the high seas! Things have certainly changed here in the native province of Confucius, who said, 'a door to the backyard is not a real door, a woman is not a human being.'"[37] Here,

[37] *The Fishing Village* in *How Yukong Moved the Mountains*. It is worth mentioning that Ivens's quotation from Confucius is falsified. In a way, this imprudence reveals his leftist emotionality in favor of Chinese communism.

what we witness is Ivens's celebration of universalism based on his left-wing tendency. For him, the de-differentiation between masculinity and femininity not only signifies an advancement of Chinese history but also sets a progressive example for the contemporary West, where feminists have long been struggling against the social discrimination against women.

From a self-reflexive point of view, Ivens's filmic observation is endorsed by Simone de Beauvoir, who paid an investigatory visit to China sixteen years before Ivens:

> The march toward socialism implies the emancipation of the individual, the affirmation of his right to self-determination. Marriage, motherhood have become free. Love is viewed as something "Progressive." Far and away from being in contradiction, personal aspirations and duty to country jibe: for the commonweal everyone must strive after his own welfare. The road to collectivization is also that by which the woman is acceding to dignity, the youth to freedom. The bourgeoisie, which at one time used to take pride in having brought a condition of general well-being to Europe, ought to take pleasure in the fact that in China it has become the very foundation of good citizenship.[38]

In the leftist position, both Ivens and de Beauvoir establish connections between Chinese communism and women's liberation. This correlation is historically plausible, given the fact that feudalism,[39] which was ideologically supported by Confucianism, was one of the major targets of China's communist revolution. In modern Chinese history, the independence of women was deemed an intrinsic goal of the revolution, and the eradication of traditional femininity was put on the agenda in the name of the proletarian revolution. Once marginalized in society, Chinese women were expected to reverse their adversities and dedicate themselves to the unprecedented

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[38] De Beauvoir, *The Long March*, 164.

[39] In contrast to its classic manifestation in medieval Europe, feudalism in China refers to a social system featuring imperial government at the macro level and paternalistic family at the micro level.

cause of communism. As a result, femininity was overwhelmed by class character, which resulted in the masculinization of Chinese women and the emergence of industrious "Mulans."

Illustrated by the March Eighth Crew, the new image of Chinese women appealed to Western feminists to a great extent: "if, in China, a tradition – so long as one managed to free it from its hierarchical-bureaucratic-patriarchal burden – made it possible that (aside from the anatomical) there would be no more symbolic difference between two metaphysical entities (men and women) – but rather a subtle differentiation on each side of the biological barrier, which itself would be recognized by a social law only to be contested again and again."[40] Basically, Kristeva believes that China has revolutionized itself by eliminating social hierarchies and providing a total solution to gender equality. It is in this sense that the PRC evinces a cultural progressiveness compared with the West and manifests itself as a superior nation in terms of gender equality.[41] Analogous to European heroines such as Joan of Arc and Florence Nightingale, the female sailors in *The Fishing Village* distinguish themselves for their transformative agency and constitute a sharp contrast to their bourgeois counterparts. These contemporary "Mulans," in balance of dynamism and austerity, are not so much a documentation of Chinese women in Maoist times as a visualization of Ivens's ideal femininity from the leftist perspective.

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[40] Kristeva, *About Chinese Women*, 198-99.

[41] The Maoist denial of sexual difference is controversial among feminist scholars. In opposition to de Beauvoir's and Kristeva's endorsements, Li Xiaojiang and Dai Jinhua consider this phenomenon as an alternative male-chauvinism and disapprove of it for precipitating a pseudo gender equality in deprivation of female subjectivity. It is worth mentioning that different views on this issue are in negative correlation with the critics' cultural identity: while Western feminists celebrate it as a progressive other, their Chinese counterparts tend to criticize it from the perspective of historical reflection.

4.4. The Recession of Utopia: *A Tale of the Wind* and the Disillusionment of Ivens's Chinese Dream

As in the case of *Chung Kuo*, the release of *How Yukong Moved the Mountains* aroused sensational disputes in both Chinese and Western societies. On the side of the PRC, the death of Mao in 1976 not only prefigured the end of the Cultural Revolution but also entailed a reevaluation of Maoism in the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the CPC in 1978. Terminating the personality cult of Mao, the CPC's decision also abandoned the Maoist route of "continued revolution under socialism," followed by a redirection of national development toward economic growth. Under the new guideline of "reform and opening-up," *How Yukong Moved the Mountains*'s positive portrait of the Cultural Revolution became politically incorrect in China, and the movie was consigned to oblivion in public media and served mainly for archival purposes.

On the Western side, the collapse of the Cultural Revolution brought to light the faults of Chinese communism and historically induced a disillusionment among European leftists. Consequently, *How Yukong Moved the Mountains* earned its notoriety as a partisan film commissioned by the CPC, and Ivens was blamed as "a propagandist of an inhuman system" in parallel with Leni Riefenstahl.[42] In addition to the chronic controversy over his leftism, this censure further put Ivens into a beleaguered predicament and resulted in a prolonged dormancy in his artistic career.[43] In 1985, Ivens returned to China at the age of 87 and initiated a new

[42] Bert Hogenkamp, "A Special Relationship: Joris Ivens and the Netherlands," in *Joris Ivens and the Documentary Context*, 183.

[43] Marceline Loridan-Ivens, "Joris Ivens and I," in *Joris Ivens and Documentary Film*, ed. Sun Hongyun, Xu Yi, and Kees Bakker (Changchun, CN: Jilin Publishing Group, 2014), 276.

project in the name of *A Tale of the Wind*. Like *Before Spring/Letters from China*, this work combines poetic features with a political tendency and constitutes an ultimate celebration of his half-century "China complex."

At the outset, *A Tale of the Wind* presents a mise-en-scène that dramatizes the origin of Ivens's Chinese dream. Under a huge windmill (Figure 4.9), young Ivens ardently announces his ambitious plan of "flying to China" (Figure 4.10). Not only does this scene draw geographical connections between the Netherlands and the PRC, it also gives a hint of the wind-like momentum of Ivens's artistic career. Aimed at "filming the wind," *A Tale of the Wind* amalgamates Lumièrian representability with Méliènsian fantasy and unfolds Ivens's affectionate sentiment toward China and the Chinese people.

Figure 4.9. "A Windmill Symbolizing the Netherlands." *A Tale of the Wind*, directed by Joris Ivens and Marceline Loridan-Ivens (1988; Paris: Capi Films, 1989), DVD. (left)
Figure 4.10. "Young Ivens Announcing His Plan to Fly to China." *A Tale of the Wind*. (right)

As the centerpiece of the film, the wind signifies a fluid agency that may bring changes to reality. Metaphorically, it represents Ivens's left-wing activism and serves as a symbol of his utopian aspiration. In the first half, *A Tale of the Wind* lays emphasis on the director's frustration of the quest for the wind. On the historical level, this plot reflects Ivens's confusion about China's disenchantment with the Cultural Revolution. On the one hand, the ebb of Maoism and

the revival of capitalist factors have canceled the progressiveness of China compared with Western countries. On the other hand, the policy of "reform and opening-up" has put an end to Chinese communism and reduced China's desired alterity for European leftists. As a result, Ivens can't help but reconsider his revolutionary optimism in *How Yukong Moved the Mountains*. It is in this circumstance that he presents himself in pursuit of the wind, which philosophically stands for an absent goal to be accomplished. In *A Tale of the Wind*, this import is revealed in Ivens's fantastic conversation with the Chinese goddess of the moon, Chang'e. After being told that the moon lacks wind, the director replies in surprise: "No wind? How can one live with that?"[44] Though disappointed at the decline of communism in China, Ivens is reluctant to compromise with the bourgeoisie and maintains his dedication to the struggle for an ideal society. From this perspective, *A Tale of the Wind* is not so much a documentary about post-Mao China as a visualization of the Flying Dutchman's perplexed mentality in the post-communist world. This puzzlement is embodied throughout the film and receives its concentrated representation in two significant sections.

By means of Brechtianism, Ivens presents a miscellaneous scene in which the diversity of China in the 1980s is dramatically exhibited. In a theatrical space, he juxtaposes a series of cultural elements such as brigade meeting, oil drilling, gymnastic training, and Beijing Opera performance (Figure 4.11). In a way, this plot constitutes a visual tribute to the director's previous themes represented in *How Yukong Moved the Mountains*. As the scene proceeds, an English verse of rock music intrudes into the mise-en-scène and interrupts its performative

[44] *A Tale of the Wind*, directed by Joris Ivens and Marceline Loridan-Ivens (1988; Paris: Capi Films, 1989), DVD.

consistency.[45] On the phenomenological level, this aural disruption symbolizes the Western influence on China during the “reform and opening-up” period, and the interruptive noise subtly manifests Ivens’s visceral antipathy toward bourgeois culture. Most importantly, this Brechtian deployment deconstructs Ivens’s ideal society visualized in *How Yukong Moved the Mountains* and further signifies an elapse of his quest for utopia.

Figure 4.11. “The Juxtaposition of Brigade Meeting, Oil Drilling, and Beijing Opera Performance.” *A Tale of the Wind*.

At the end of *A Tale of the Wind*, Ivens’s disillusionment culminates in a scene when he finally captures the wind with the help of a witch, whose paranormal power ideologically conflicts with his faith in communism (Figure 4.12). In the scene to follow, a little girl is shown standing against the wind with great resolution (Figure 4.13). This image of nascence is in sharp contrast to antiquated superstition, and Ivens’s ambiguous attitude toward contemporary China is thus revealed. On the one hand, the renouncement of Maoism has disabled the progressive momentum of the PRC, which hermeneutically explains the film’s absence of the wind and Ivens’s reliance on sorcery. On the other hand, the determined girl not only symbolizes a budding potentiality but also signifies the director’s continued hope for post-Mao China. As the last work

[45] The specific verse reads, “Marianne, Marianne, Marianne, won’t you stay for me.” It is taken from the Hong Kong singer Alan Tam’s song, “Man in Search of the Wind” (1984).

of Ivens, *A Tale of the Wind* ends with a puzzlement. In the wake of *The 400 Million* (1938), *Before Spring/Letters from China* (1958), and *How Yukong Moved the Mountains* (1976), this intricate movie puts an end to Ivens's China complex and plays the last note of Western leftist filmmakers' visual representation of the PRC. Compared with Marker, Godard, and Antonioni, Ivens is distinguished for his lifelong dedication to leftism and utopian identification with Red China. Spanning half a century, his China-related documentaries constitute a historical lens through which the vicissitudes of Chinese communism are narrated from a combined perspective of politics and aesthetics.

Figure 4.12. "The Witch Praying for the Wind." *A Tale of the Wind*. (left)
Figure 4.13. "The Girl Standing against the Wind." *A Tale of the Wind*. (right)

CONCLUSION

In the foregoing chapters, the visual representations of Red China by Western leftist filmmakers have demonstrated an intricate cross-cultural relationship between left-wing politics and left-wing aesthetics. Specifically, Marker's *Sunday in Peking* illustrates how documentary film can be employed to celebrate leftism with a phenomenological approach. Godard's *La Chinoise* challenges the aesthetic norm of cinematography and explores the political agency of film on the formal level. Antonioni's *Chung Kuo*, along with the controversies it has aroused, reveals the revolutionary potentiality of film and unveils the confrontation between Western leftist aesthetics and Chinese leftist politics. Ivens's *How Yukong Moved the Mountains*, as a comprehensive portrait of China during the Cultural Revolution, epitomizes European left-wing directors' politico-aesthetic representations of China by means of visual apparatus.

In this conclusion, my goal is to re-conceptualize these four movies as a whole. Based on Emmanuel Levinas's and Matei Calinescu's frameworks, I will shed new light on the two core notions embedded in the problematics of Red China through the lens of Western leftist filmmakers, predicated on the ethics of self and other and the dialectic of left-wing politics and left-wing aesthetics. In so doing, my hope is to extend the significance of my dissertation into the realm of critical thought, so that the general issue of art in relation to politics can be reexamined in the context of the twentieth-century leftist movement.

There is little doubt that European leftist directors' portrayals of communist China contain an ethical dimension in which the Western self represents the Chinese other. This dimension is twofold. On the one hand, China has been a geographical other for the West down through the ages. As a result, these filmmakers tend to recognize the PRC as the successor of

ancient China and project their Marcopoloesque sentiment onto its cultural image. On the other hand, the emergence of Chinese communism distinguishes China from the Western world for its socio-political supersession of capitalism. As both aspects appeal to their political and cultural (un)conscious, the radical directors naturally take the PRC as a desirable other for European leftists, whose critical attitude toward the bourgeoisie has put them in tension with the ideology of their native lands. Because of this dual otherness, Red China appears as a romanticized utopia through the lens of Western leftist filmmakers. On the philosophical level, this idealization of the other finds its rationale in the phenomenology of Emmanuel Levinas.

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas puts forward a "transcendent other" in connection with self: "history as a relationship between men ignores a position of the I before the other in which the other remains transcendent with respect to me. Though of myself I am not exterior to history, I do find in the Other a point that is absolute with regard to history – not by amalgamating with the Other, but in speaking with him."[1] In this light, the other occurs as an ethical counterpart in relation to which the identification of self is accomplished. It is this alterity that engenders a historical transcendence that not only appeals to self but also presents a worthy property for its self-confirmation. In relation to my topic, Red China for Marker, Godard, Antonioni, and Ivens serves as such a "transcendent other" in contrast to Western capitalism. From their perspective, Chinese communism, on the one hand, represents a political movement of progressiveness consistent with their own left-wing mentality; on the other hand, it signifies an alternative infinity by envisioning a messianic future of humanity. Thus, European leftist directors'

[1] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 52.

portrayals of the PRC are not so much a visual representation of the other as they are a psychological identification with self. What these films manifest, on the ethical level, is the Western absence of transcendence from their producers' leftist perspectives of their own.

Besides the ethics of self and other, the dialectic of left-wing politics and left-wing aesthetics constitutes another core issue embedded in the problematics of Red China through the lens of Western leftist filmmakers. In this respect, Matei Calinescu offers a framework in which the relationship between the political and the artistic avant-gardes can be meaningfully examined: "the latter [insist] on the independently revolutionary potential of art, while the former tend to justify the opposite idea, namely, that art should submit itself to the requirements and needs of the political revolutionists. But both start from the same premise: life should be radically changed."[2] In other words, progressive art and progressive politics share a cultural gene of radical transformation. Driven by this dialectical momentum, Western leftist filmmakers and Red China developed their mutual affinity, which historically gave rise to the four movies analyzed in this dissertation. However, the former's ideal of "art for the sake of revolution" fundamentally conflicted with the latter's principle of "art in the service of revolution." It was this inner divergence that planted seeds for the ideological tension between Western leftist aesthetics and Chinese leftist politics, as is evidenced in the Chinese denunciation of Antonioni's *Chung Kuo*.

In this exceptional event, Antonioni devoted himself to representing Chinese communism from the angle of a European progressive, but the Chinese authorities vehemently criticized his

[2] Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1987), 104.

work as derogatory through their lens of socialist realism. This schism between "politicizing art" and "aestheticizing politics," on the one hand, clarifies the conceptual dissonance between left-wing politics and left-wing aesthetics; on the other hand, it reveals the root cause of the historical misunderstanding between Antonioni and the PRC. In contrast to *Chung Kuo*'s ambiguity of interpretation, Ivens's *How Yukong Moved the Mountains* features an unequivocal compatibility with the dominant ideology of Red China. This partisanship has roots in Ivens's wholehearted dedication to the proletarian revolution of Third World countries. In a way, the Flying Dutchman has subordinated the identity of nation to that of class. It is this revolutionary cosmopolitanism that lays the foundation for his lifelong friendship with the CPC and his moral predicament in the Western world.

In "The Trace of the Other," Levinas proposes a dualism regarding the Western experience of alterity: while Odysseus eventually returns home after an adventurous journey to foreign lands, Abraham winds up as a homeless man who wanders in the infinity of otherness.[3] In my research, Antonioni and Ivens correspond to these two archetypal figures respectively, given that the former experienced a visible decline of left-wing tendency in the 1970s, whereas the latter maintained a saintlike leftism throughout his life. Their films about Red China, along with the circumstances that they encountered, constitute an intersection where the ethics of self and other meets the dialectic of left-wing politics and left-wing aesthetics. In the context of twentieth-century history, Western leftist filmmakers' visual representations of Red China may serve as a conceptual lens through which the significance of leftism unfolds on the cross-cultural

[3] Emmanuel Levinas, "The Trace of the Other," trans. Alphonso Lingis, in *Deconstruction in Context: Literature and Philosophy*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

level. Through an integration of film analysis, critical inquiry, and historical studies, this dissertation has done some preliminary work in an uncharted realm. I hope it will facilitate the emergence of more extensive and in-depth scholarship and lay the groundwork for a new paradigm of cultural studies free from academic politics.

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Yi Da and Ying Xiao. "Contemptible Cinematography." In *Chinese People are not Allowed to be Insulted – Repudiating Antonioni's Anti-China Film Chung Kuo*. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, 1974.

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Zhou, Ning. *The Celestial Empire Is Far Away: Studies on the Western Images of China*. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2006.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Le Tang, who goes by “Ray” in English, was born in Beijing, China. From 2003 to 2010, he studied at Nanjing University and received a BA in Chinese Language and Literature and an MA in Theory of Literature and Art. His master’s thesis, “The Historical Logic of ‘Horizon of Expectations’: From St. Petersburg to Prague to Constance,” examines three major schools of literary theory – Russian Formalism, the Prague Linguistic Circle, and the Aesthetic of Reception – and locates a developmental trajectory in their conceptions of literary history. Before entering the doctoral program at The University of Texas at Dallas in 2012, he served as an editor at Qunyan Press in Beijing.

Le Tang has published two journal articles in Chinese, “Cultural Critique of Early Era Chinese Rock Music Lyrics” and “Realist Film Theory and European Left-wing Thought.” They appear in *Hundred Schools of Art* and *Journal of Zhejiang University (Humanities and Social Sciences)*, respectively.

CURRICULUM VITAE

Le Tang

EDUCATION

The University of Texas at Dallas Aug. 2012 – May 2018

- Doctor of Philosophy in Humanities, with a focus on Philosophy of Art

Nanjing University, China Sept. 2007 − June 2010

- Master of Arts with a specialization in Theory of Literature and Art

Nanjing University, China Sept. 2003 − June 2007

- Bachelor of Arts with a major in Chinese Language and Literature

WORKING EXPERIENCE

Teaching Assistant, School of Arts and Humanities, UT Dallas Aug. 2012 – May 2018

- Evaluated and provided feedback on student coursework
- Managed course information through eLearning

Research Assistant, Center for Translation Studies, UT Dallas

May – Aug. 2013, May – Aug. 2014, May – Aug. 2015, May – Aug. 2016, May – Aug. 2017

- Facilitated the institution's daily management and data compilation

Editor, Qunyan Press, Beijing Aug. 2011 – July 2012

- Edited and promoted books on humanities and social sciences

Program Assistant, **Council on International Educational Exchange (CIEE)**, **Nanjing**

June 2010 – May 2011

- Assisted the Resident Director in designing and managing the program
- Organized field trips and cultural activities for overseas students

PUBLICATIONS

Tang, Le. "Cultural Critique of Early Era Chinese Rock Music Lyrics." *Hundred Schools of Art,* 2 (2009).

Tang, Le and Ming Dong Gu. "Realist Film Theory and European Left-wing Thought." *Journal of Zhejiang University (Humanities and Social Sciences Online Edition)*, 1/26/2018.

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

"The Germanization of Modern Chinese Philosophy: A Historical Survey." *Transnational*

Asia Graduate Student Conference (TAGS), Rice University. February 21–22, 2014.

"Traditional Chinese Medicine as an Antinomy of Humanities and Science: A New Perspective of Conceptualizing Complementary and Alternative Medicine." *The 4th Annual Conference on Values in Medicine, Science, and Technology,* UT Dallas, May 20–23, 2014.

ACTIVITIES AND AWARDS

Board Member, **Dallas Huayun Orchestra** Apr. 2014 – Nov. 2017

- Managed the band's event planning and its affiliation with the Confucius Institute at UT Dallas
- Executive Producer of four special concerts: *Song of Cathay* (Sept. 27, 2014), *Four Seasons of China* (Nov. 7, 2015), *Wind from the East* (Sept. 25, 2016), and *Songs of the South* (Nov. 18, 2017)
- Principal percussionist of the band

Volunteer Staff, Confucius Institute at UT Dallas Aug. 2012 – Nov. 2017

- Fulfilled such roles as the stage director of annual Chinese New Year celebrations and the keynote speaker of Chinese culture activities

President, **Guitar Club of Nanjing University** Sept. 2004 – June 2005

- Raised funds through trading musical instruments and offering music lessons
- Organized the Nanjing University Modern Music Festival series

Musician, **Campus Album *Corner Missing*** June 2008 – Mar. 2009

- Wrote and recorded original music in collaboration with fellow NJU students

Musician, **Nanjing University On-campus Concerts** 2003 – 2009

- Organized the band's rehearsals and performances
- Performed as singer and guitarist in the band

Excellent Master's Thesis Award, Nanjing University 2010

Excellent Graduate Student Scholarship, Nanjing University 2009

Outstanding Graduate, Nanjing University 2007

Distinguished Student Association Leader, Nanjing University 2005

Top Ten Singer, Nanjing University 2005