

Maoisms, National Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives

An Introduction

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Le Joli Mao

The charismatic and controversial figure of Mao Zedong has not only left a deep mark on the history of twentieth-century China — looming still over the country's new capitalist developments, as a sort of ghost — but it has also spread remarkably beyond national borders and into completely different political and social contexts. In particular, after the start of the Cultural Revolution (1966) several groups inspired by Chinese Marxism-Leninism appeared worldwide. From the United States to India, from New Zealand to Peru, from Hong Kong to Japan, as well as within European countries, specific political ideals, revolutionary propositions, fantasies and images of purity have been projected onto the figure of Mao, to some extent giving way to a form of idolatry — so called *maolâtrie*. His benevolent face has become the symbol of what François Fejtő shortly after called 'a dream incarnate',¹ in particular for the generation who took part in the demonstrations in public squares during May 1968 and who, brandishing the book with *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung* (this is the real title of the *Little Red Book*), hoped to emulate the deeds of the Red Guards and overturn the *status quo*. In fact, in those very years, as well as during the following decades, Maoism represented, at a transnational level, an extraordinary label that aggregated different desires and intellectual-affective investments in relation to their cultural and geo-political contexts. Essentially, as a cultural phenomenon, Maoism turned into an ideal scenario in which everyone was able to invest whatever they wanted; each country developed and, so to speak, re-invented 'its own' Maoism with specific characteristics that were often completely different from the Chinese original.

Though there is a vast bibliography on Chinese as well as international Maoism that has continued only to grow during these last few months of celebrations of the fiftieth anniversary of 1968 in France, much less exhaustive is the bibliography dedicated to the impact that the pro-China infatuation has had in the field of cinematography. There are several reasons for this. The main motive concerns the difficulty to distinguish the clear traits of Maoist doctrine in films, documentaries

¹ François Fejtő, *Chine/URSS: De l'alliance au conflit* (Paris: Seuil, 1973), p. 449.

and other media products. In China we can observe a significant reduction of film production and an increased ideological regimentation, especially after the uprisings that broke out in 1966. In Europe, on the other hand, the first films to deal with the impact of these events, such as Marco Bellocchio's *China Is Near* (*La Cina è vicina*, 1967) and Jean Luc Godard's *La Chinoise* (1967), prefer to point out the actual difficulties that both directors and their film characters face when trying to render in artwork or political activity the slogans of what Alain Badiou calls 'the last revolution still attached to the motif of classes and of class struggle'.² After 1968, Maoist-oriented documentaries and fiction films were produced principally by a number of collectives, such as the Dziga Vertov, Foudre or Front Paysan groups in France or the militants of *Servire il Popolo* in Italy. However, these films have only rarely been distributed beyond the circles of radical militancy and they are not always easy to distinguish from the other politically committed works that followed the 1968 experience, which were inspired by other Marxist-oriented doctrines and actually stood in opposition to Maoism. In other words, the impact of the pro-Maoist films is far from comparable to that of the films inspired by the Soviet and (later) the Cuban revolutions.

And yet in those years film industry workers often declared, as did many intellectuals, their sympathies towards the uprising of the Red Guards. In addition to the aforementioned Godard and Bellocchio, personalities such as Joris Ivens, Marceline Loridan, Chris Marker, Agnes Varda, Marin Karmitz, the actors Lou Castel and Gian Maria Volonté also had their *années Mao*;³ even Sergio Leone in his *Duck, You Sucker!* (*Giù la testa*, 1971) or Michelangelo Antonioni in *Chung-kuo Cina* (1972) partly sympathize with the People's Republic and its Great Helmsman. Militant criticism of course also played its part as well: the editorial staff of the *Cahiers du cinéma* (from 1969 to 1973), of the *Cinéthique* and the literary magazine *Tel Quel* can be considered Maoist-oriented, and we should not forget other periodicals such as *Ombre rosse* in Italy or *Screen* in the UK that published editorials and critiques inspired by the Cultural Revolution. From the 1960s to the 1970s film critics such as Jean-Louis Comolli, Serge Daney, Régis Bergeron, Goffredo Fofi, and many others, without mentioning personalities as Jean-Paul Sartre, Alain Badiou, Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva, Philippe Sollers, form a whole army of intellectuals and scholars that embrace the 'Chinese road' to communism.

It is in this gap between widespread fascination and the difficulty of its artistic-aesthetic rendering (the *Cahiers du cinéma* of that period are, perhaps not by chance, without illustrations) that we wish to insert the monographic issue that *Cinéma & Cie* dedicates to Maoism, with a specific focus on the impact of the Cultural Revolution on specific cinematic cultures fifty years after its apogee.

² Alain Badiou, 'The Cultural Revolution: The Last Revolution?', *positions*, 13.3 (2005), 507.

³ François Hourmant, *Les Années Mao en France: Avant, pendant et après mai 68* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2018).

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In the title, however, we talk about Maoisms in plural form, since it is quite clear that, as Christophe Bourseiller puts it, this label has come to aggregate numerous ‘[intellectual and emotional] investments and just as many phantoms’, all depending on their relative historical contexts. In fact, ‘as a cultural phenomenon, it [has] been the ideal place in which everyone [has been able to] invest whatever he liked’.⁴ We have chosen to focus on film experiences that are distant from one another in terms of historical period, geographical and cultural areas, and characters involved. More precisely, we have sought to bring back to light subjects and historical episodes that have been suppressed in public debates and in traditional film history books. From the beginning, we abandoned the idea of offering a complete description of the various ‘adventures’ influenced by Maoism, or of arranging them in a precise chronological order. We have, on the contrary, preferred to select studies that can pose questions across different contexts, cultures, and nations, with particular attention to the repression strategies, the ideological aporias, the cultural dynamics and the political struggles that characterized the relationship between Maoism and national cinemas, from the immediate aftermath of the Cultural Revolution to the present day.

An Overview of the Special Issue

All the articles included in this special issue adopt a trans-historical and transcultural perspective, suggesting to some extent that the complexity of the process of translation and ‘reinvention’ of Maoism in different cultural and national contexts calls for a comparative approach, in order to highlight the specificities and distinctive features of each experience.

Our journey through transnational Maoisms begins in France, probably the European country in which the fascination for the Cultural Revolution has had the most relevant cultural impact, especially after May 1968. Man-tat Terence Leung’s article considers two of the most ‘inflammatory’ works made by Jean-Luc Godard together with his long-time collaborator Jean-Pierre Gorin during their militancy in the Maoist collective Dziga Vertov Group, *Wind from the East* (*Vent d’est*, 1969) and *All’s Well* (*Tout va bien*, 1972). Through an in-depth textual study, the author highlights the different ways in which the two films employ the Maoist ideology, its slogans and keywords, its political perspective. The 1969 film seems to interpret (enthusiastically and somewhat superficially) Maoism as mere revolutionary doctrine, therefore trying to ‘brainwash’ the viewer into violently revolt against the status quo through incessant Brechtian stimuli and coercive ‘counter-cinema’ aesthetic strategies. Conversely, with its more sophisticated (albeit relatively more conventional) narrative and aesthetics, *All’s Well* sees Maoism as a subtle epistemological tool for understanding the predicaments of

⁴ Christophe Bourseiller, *Les Maoïstes: La folle histoire des gardes rouges français* (Paris: Points 2008), p. 438.

Western societies. In particular, Leung focuses his analysis on the renowned ten-minute tracking shot set in a supermarket: according to the author, this long take represents the (successful) attempt of the two directors to employ the Maoist 'theory of contradictions' in their investigation of 'the structural ambivalence between leftism and rightism pertaining to the modern capitalist system'. In his view, the 1972 film penetrates and denaturalizes the 'symbolic fabric of contemporary neoliberal consensus', thus revealing the (never fully expressed and partly still effective) 'emancipatory potential' of post-1968 French Maoism.

Stéphanie Benzaquen-Gautier shifts the focus to two other European countries, analysing a pair of very different — differently embedded — documentary/ethnographic movies about the Khmer Rouge produced in Yugoslavia and Sweden. Her article first contextualizes the historical contingencies that made these two films possible, before dwelling secondly on a stylistic and formal analysis, that shows how different representational strategies inscribe Cambodian Maoism in the Yugoslavian and Swedish national cultures. At the end of the 1970s, arguably under the pressure of the Chinese communist party, the leaders of Democratic Kampuchea invited journalists from friendly countries and representatives from Western Maoist organizations. The aim of these visits was obviously to present a positive image of the country, but interestingly, the two documentaries tell very different stories and were received with opposing attitudes. The former was an implicit criticism of the totalitarian regime; the latter a complete endorsement of the Khmer Rouge. Hence, the violent rejection of the Yugoslavian film from the Cambodian government was not without its reasons: as Benzaquen-Gautier demonstrates, the Yugoslavian filmmaker Nikola Vitorović could not deliver an explicit critique of the regime, but via cinematic language (editing, juxtaposition, an ambiguous use of music) he managed to add a layer to the superficial propaganda discourse as an 'attempt, however limited, to deconstruct the scenery elaborated by the CPK leaders'. Benzaquen-Gautier shows how the national context — here, the Eastern bloc was still swamped in the cold war — reacts to the Cambodian declination of Maoism by creating a complex, challenging dialogue via allegoric cinematic expression. On the other hand, Swedish intellectual, journalist and filmmaker Jan Myrdal maintained his Maoist conviction and produced a documentary explicitly endorsing Khmer Rouge politics. Through a comparative approach, the article investigates the positioning of the filmmakers in a dialogue between 'us' and 'them' which demands a negotiation between 'solidarity, identification, and denunciation'.

Sanghita Sen's article brings us instead to India, where the Naxal movement — a Marxist-Leninist-Maoist armed revolutionary movement — emerged in May 1967. The author analyses selected films that deal with the Naxal/Maoist movements and unravel their socio-cultural impact. This journey is not only physical but temporal as well; the essay focuses in the first part on movies from the 1960s: agit-prop, militant works that engage directly with the spectatorship by soliciting a critical vision. These texts are therefore revolutionary both in

content and form, seeking an alternative to the escapist, commercial tradition. Sen nonetheless acutely analyses the complexities of this ‘parallel cinema’; namely, in comparing the works by Satyajit Ray and Mrinal Sen — two directors both engaged in a ‘Calcutta trilogy’ — Sen shows how aesthetical and formal choices helped to link Indian parallel cinema to similar movements in the ‘world cinema’ context, but also that every director developed his own strategy to write a counter history and challenge mainstream cinema via the deconstruction of national (and nationalistic) narrative mode. The paper provides close analysis of Ray’s and Sen’s use of documentary footage, location shooting, jump cuts and montage that debunked ‘pavlovian’ Bollywood style. The article, also shifts its focus to Bollywood cinema from the 1990s, questioning the heritage of the Naxal movement on a more recent society and its arts. By paying close attention to historic movies that depicted the Maoist frenzy, some directors managed to stay in the system by delivering melodramatic movies and at the same time strived to deconstruct nationalistic stereotypes. These negotiations raise questions about Maoist movements in contemporary cinema: is it domestication or inception?

This question could not be more urgent than in China itself, and Wendy Xie’s paper brings us back to where it the movement started. In her article, the author analyses the remake of a classic ‘model opera’ that legendary director Tsui Hark filmed in his flamboyant, hyperkinetic mode in 2014. This appropriation seems to condensate the contradictions of contemporary China itself: how can a Communist nation — where the portrait of Mao still lingers on Tiananmen square and (quite amusingly) on the much-coveted banknotes — integrate the high spectacle coming from Hong Kong’s tradition of martial and fantastic movies (despite the fact that they were banned in Maoist China)? And more specifically, is Tsui’s enterprise purely lip-service to Beijing, or did he include in his work a multi-layered discourse that can be interpreted as challenging Red nostalgia? Xie develops a stringent argument in favour of this second hypothesis. In the first part she shows how the novel that inspired the propaganda film is indebted to the chivalric tradition of vernacular novels that shaped the collective imaginary of the Chinese readers. Secondly, she focuses on the introduction and coda of the movie, where a young protagonist discovers (in New York) the long forgotten, classic revolutionary canon. By inscribing his action movie in the retrospective gaze of a millennial, and by erasing any clear political reference, Tsui Hark undercuts the reverential Communist ideology and offers to the attentive spectator an array of hypothesis concerning the place of Red nostalgia in contemporary China. Where does national construction and family history meet — or collide? Maoist nostalgia and contemporary propaganda apparently serve the same aim, but is that really so? Tsui’s recreation of the wartime drama collapses all the formal devices of the original ‘model opera’, appropriating the story with a self-conscious positioning as representational rather than original. This simulacrum seems to be a symptom of an anxiety vis-à-vis contemporary China’s value system, ideological drive and self-recognition. Zooming out, while Wendy Xie’s article is aptly focused on the cradle of Maoism, her enquiry is

ultimately pertinent to many transnational realities that used, copied, quoted, translated, mocked, critiqued or discussed Maoist ethics and aesthetics.

Similar issues are explored by Kristian Feigelson, whose article adopts a comparative transnational and trans-historical perspective in order to make sense of how the Cultural Revolution has been represented and understood in two different cultural contexts: French auteur cinema of the 1960s and 1970s and Chinese cinema of the Sixth Generation. In the first part of his essay, Feigelson draws a comparison between *La Chinoise* and René Viénet's *Can Dialectics Break Bricks?* (*La Dialectique peut-elle casser les briques?*, 1973). According to the author, Godard's 1967 film still presents many of the representational and ideological clichés of French Orientalism, in that it does not perceive the Cultural Revolution as a controversial historical event, but rather as an 'exotic' mythology to embrace a-critically and a-problematically. Contrarily to this, Viénet's situationist film uses the technique of *détournement* — re-dubbing and adding a new soundtrack to a pre-existing, average kung fu film — in order to distort and criticize the Maoist doctrine and its too enthusiastic reception within the French intelligentsia, at the same time polemically addressing the economic exploitation and social alienation inherent in Western capitalism. In the second part, the article shifts its attention to contemporary China, discussing the ways in which a few directors of the Sixth Generation have moved beyond the official conciliatory discourses on the Maoist period promoted by the Communist government today, in order to adopt a more controversial vision of the Cultural Revolution and its 'shadows'. In particular, the author analyses the independent movie *The Ditch* (*Jiabiangou*, Wang Bing, 2010), as a perfect example of this change of attitude: with its balance between modernism and digital minimalism, the movie narrates the sufferings of a group of (alleged) dissidents imprisoned in a labour camp right after the Hundred Flowers Campaign, thus shedding light on one of the darkest pages of Chinese history.

The last essay of the special issue somewhat inscribes some of the questions discussed in the previous articles in a wider framework, at the same time opening a new possible strand of research. Analysing Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Dreamers* (2003) and Jiang Wen's *In the Heat of the Sun* (*Yangguang canlan de rizi*, 1994), Yomi Braester proposes the category of 'post-Maoist cinema' to make sense of a series of works that have reconsidered the Maoist era through a strong historical, political and metalinguistic conscience from the 1990s onwards, expressing both a feeling of nostalgia for an idealistic period and a harsh criticism of past excesses. For the author, this post-Maoist cinema is fundamentally a transnational phenomenon, that reveals several common, defining traits regardless of the national context in which the films are produced. First of all, according to Braester, post-Maoist films conceive Maoism essentially as a set of performative acts, detached from any explicit militant or ideological reflection. In other words, the use of specific Maoist imageries, symbolisms, or keywords is not functional to the direct narration of what Maoism itself actually was; rather, they serve to create a vivid portrait of the tensions that characterized any given country

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(France and China, in this case) during the Maoist period — that is, cultural, social, generational processes and so on. More precisely, the article is focused on the examination of two key characteristics of post-Maoist cinema: the depiction of sexuality and the representation of cinephilia, both intended as tools for an implicit ‘critical reassessment’ of Maoism. Indeed, on the one hand, Maoism is not considered as a body of doctrines for the social and economic revolution, but rather as a cultural climate thanks to which the characters succeed in breaking bourgeois taboos, a sort of ‘subterfuge’ for the expression of their individual selves, and especially of their sexuality. On the other, the representation of movie-going or the intertextual references to other (Maoist) films to some extent project an air of unreality about Maoism, as though it were, after all, only a cinephiliac invention.

To conclude, the articles here presented highlight the theoretical productivity of the contamination between film studies and cultural history in order to make sense of a ‘repressed’ and concealed experience, such as the reinvention of Maoism in national cinemas. This specific line of film production, now almost forgotten, can on the contrary speak to (and of) our historical memory. As a transnational phenomenon, Maoism penetrated various national contexts in many different ways, each time being translated and transformed, depending on the characters of each country and film industry. In this sense, researching Maoist cinemas provides a stimulating (albeit certainly eccentric) point of view, not only for the study of the single films, authors, or ‘movements’, but also for the comprehension of the societies and cultures that have produced them. Although we are perfectly aware that this special issue barely scratches the surface of such a complex subject matter, it is precisely from within this perspective that we wish to invite further research.