

Chinese Fictions in France and Shadows in China¹

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Abstract

Unlike written production, which was plentiful, only a few French fictional films about the Cultural Revolution were produced between 1966 and 1976. Nevertheless, it was the object of contradictory discourse in two films which reveal the cultural cleavages in 1960s and 1970s French society. Jean-Luc Godard's *La Chinoise* (1967) and René Viénet's *Can Dialectics Break Bricks?* (*La Dialectique peut-elle casser les briques?*, 1973) confront Maoist and anti-Maoist perspectives, as seen from France. Simon Leys's seminal book *Chinese Shadows* and its problematization of the achievements of the Cultural Revolution serve here as a point of departure for an analysis of the various debates of this period. This article will also take into consideration a few contemporary Chinese films that form a sort of counterpoint to the French fiction films of the 1960s and 1970s. Wang Bing's *The Ditch* (*Jiabianguo*, 2010), for instance, unveils the consequences of the Hundred Flowers Campaign and the Great Leap Forward (1958-1960).

In what terms can we consider the role of the fiction that addressed the Chinese Cultural Revolution in the mid-1960s? This revolution was visible early on in Chinese propaganda films and news reports that were widely screened abroad. Yet in France, it remained relatively unseen in the cinema, albeit frequently covered in the context of the May 1968 events. From the start of the Revolution in Beijing 1966, the French Broadcasting and Television Office (ORTF) devoted several reports and critical commentaries to the Cultural Revolution, underlining its violent nature.² Rarely filmed as fiction, it was the subject of two contradictory films, which are today considered masterpieces: *La Chinoise* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1967) and *Can Dialectics Break Bricks?* (*La Dialectique peut-elle casser des briques?*, René Viénet, 1973). Both films are particularly striking in their revelation of cultural divisions in French society in the 1960s and 1970s.³ Apart from a few

¹ The author wishes to thank Precious Brown for her translation; Flora Lichaa of the National Institute for Oriental Languages and Civilizations (INALCO) for her filmography; Bruno Philip, Beijing correspondent for *Le Monde* from 2004 to 2010, for his critical review; and, René Viénet for his comments.

² See various reports broadcast since August 1966 viewable at the French National Audiovisual Institute (Ina). The French media often experienced difficulty in dealing with the complexity of Asia. This was especially evident when the Khmer Rouge captured Phnom Penh in 1975. See in this regard *Cambodge, le génocide effacé*, ed. by Pierre Bayard and Soko Phay-Vakalis (Paris: Cecile Defaut, 2013), which examines misinformation about the reality of Cambodia in the media, like that of Patrice de Beer, correspondent for *Le Monde* who, from April 1975, viewed these events through a Maoist lense.

³ Julian Bourg, 'Tempered nostalgia in recent French films on the 68 years', in *The Long 1968*:

other purely militant or conjunctural films, such as the comical *Chinese in Paris* (*Les Chinois à Paris*, Jean Yanne, 1974), in an essentially fictional fashion, these politically-oriented films with burlesque accents juxtapose French Maoist and anti-Maoist perspectives, without ever really showing the abundant images that were seen in the media. *La Chinoise* is a fiction film produced by a well-known director at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, and *Can Dialectics Break Bricks?* is a politically engaged sinologist's remake of Tu Guangqi's kung fu film *The Crush* (*Tangshou taiquan dao*, 1972).

In contemporary China, a few isolated films have recently reconsidered the Cultural Revolution in the 'chiaroscuro' perspective that sinologist Simon Leys's seminal work *Chinese Shadows* described at the time⁴. These rare fiction films and documentaries, which will be discussed in the final part of this article, which were either not screened or seen only by small audiences in China, critically retrace this past, honouring those who were forgotten by Chinese history.

La Chinoise

In Paris, five students, Véronique (Anne Wiazemsky), Guillaume (Jean-Pierre Léaud), Henri (Michel Semeniako), Yvonne (Juliet Berto), and Kirilov (Lex de Brujin) move into one of their parents' flats to form a revolutionary cell, *Aden-Arabie*, a tribute to Paul Nizan, revisiting the ideological speech broadcast by Radio Peking.⁵ One day, while studying Marxism-Leninism and learning Chairman Mao's *Little Red Book* by heart, they plan to assassinate the Soviet Minister of Culture who is visiting Paris. The band disperses when vacation starts.⁶

Forming something of a political trilogy with his two previous films, *Made in USA* (1966) and *Two or Three Things I Know about Her* (*Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle*, 1967), *La Chinoise* alternates between still shots, longer animated sequences, and short lectures filmed behind closed doors in rooms lined with copies of the *Little Red Book*. How can imported revolutionary methods applied to French society help combat revisionism and capitalism and spark a permanent revolution, with the Vietnam War and the United States, the Sino-Soviet dispute, and the Cultural Revolution as a background, and China appearing as a radical and new communist alternative to the bureaucratic Soviet Union, supported

Revision and New Perspectives, ed. by Daniel J. Sherman, Ruud van Dijk, Jasmine Alinder and Alinder Aneesh (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), pp. 327-355; Sebastien Layerle, *Caméras en lutte en mai 68: 'Par ailleurs le cinéma est une arme...'* (Paris: Nouveau monde, 2008).

⁴ See Simon Leys, *Chinese Shadows* (New York: Viking Press, 1977).

⁵ Paul Nizan, *Aden Arabie* (Paris: Rieder, 1931).

⁶ See Alain Jouffroy's presentation of the film's storyboard in *L'Avant-scène Cinéma*, 114 (1971), and Alain Bergala, *Godard au travail: Les années 60* (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, 2006), pp. 342-362. See also Richard Brody, *Everything is Cinema: The Working Life of Jean-Luc Godard* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008), pp. 296-317.

blindly by a hegemonic French Communist Party? The camera also serves to re-evaluate the Vertovian theories of the Kino-Eye in a mise-en-scène that serve the word in an anti-spectacle film.⁷ In grotesque fashion, the film provides a counterpoint to an official Chinese comedy of that time, Wang Ping's *The East is Red* (*Dongfang hong*, 1965). Chinese vestimentary codes are respected from the cap to the mandarin collar jacket, and morning exercise is punctuated by slogans and *clichés* with different rough sound recordings, usually over a red background. One instance is the recurring slogan: 'The imperialists are still alive. They continue to reign arbitrariness in Asia, Africa and Latin America. In the West, they still oppress the masses'. Outside of these quotes from the *Little Red Book*, the script is peppered with references to Louis Althusser and Jacques Lacan who were already deemed to be the new theoretical, leftist version of Mao, but probably unreadable to a majority of Chinese viewers. Plastic and didactic elements coexist in the film, contrasting a (rather caricatured) French generational phenomenon of young Maoists to Mao's Chinese Red Guards (1966-1976), challenging hierarchy and the sudden return of 17 million *Zhiquings* (educated, urban youths) to the countryside in 1968 and 1969. Dotted with public trials, this campaign allowed for the purging and complete reorganization of the Chinese Communist Party in order to institute Mao's weakened power more durably. In fact, Godard's film, confined to a bourgeois Parisian flat, is far from this context — one that was unfamiliar to him.⁸ Only one of his actresses was of peasant origin (Juliet Berto) in this predominantly student-intellectual environment. Yet, for Parisian critics the caricatural film was ahead of its time, if not daring.

How then should this film be interpreted with respect to both Godard's filmography and the political context of an already turbulent era in France? *La Chinoise* in particular allowed Godard to take a more radical stance towards the cinema, both politically and artistically. Aiming to break with commercial cinema, this film followed the fashion of the time. The cinema had become an instrument or a revolutionary tool using Maoist ideas to connect theory and practice. It was a question of adapting these ideas to the cinema, as he had tried to do in other films such as *My Life to Live* (*Vivre sa vie*, 1962), where prostitution echoes the consumer society, or in *Week-end* (1967). Undoubtedly, *La Chinoise* marked a new militant turn in Godard's work. *The Joy of Learning* (*Le Gai Savoir*, 1968), which was not released, focused on the Third World and the Cultural Revolution in factories. *A Film Like Any Other* (*Un film comme les autres*, 1968) was shot in factories in Flins, with workers and Maoist students. This anti-film period differs sharply from the first narratives of the French New Wave. Championing Bertolt Brecht's theatre, the quasi-filmed Eastern stage of *La Chinoise* features all

⁷ See Jean-Pierre Esquenazi, *Godard et la société des années 1960* (Paris: A. Colin, 2004).

⁸ Regarding these misunderstandings and Godard's position during May 68, see Vincent Lowy, 'Rive droite /rive gauche: face à la *Nouvelle Vague*', in *Chris Marker: Pionnier et novateur*, ed. by Kristian Feigelson (Condé: Corlet, 2017), pp 54-63.

the clichés of French Orientalism, chanting a new relationship between content and form. Faithful to the maxims of the Cultural Revolution, the film, in most caricatural fashion, proclaims the crisis of world imperialism, the need to fight from the factory to the countryside, as the cinema — on a steady diet of Maoist slogans — had to be opened up in order to connect theory and practice.⁹ The film takes the form of a *ciné-tract* that is centred on the cult of Mao and supposed to synthesize these ideas, but paradoxically confined in a Parisian flat. Like the post-1968 slogans, this cinema appears as a graffitied if not elliptical form. Since then, as Godard adds, ‘realism is not how real things are, but how things really are’.¹⁰ Godard seeks a more radical questioning of the procedures in force in the cinema, although the real China seems but a pretext to support these efforts. Similarly, *Far from Vietnam* (*Loin du Vietnam*, Chris Marker, 1967) on which Godard collaborated, synthesized a collective process that was already underway in *La Chinoise*. Be that as it may, if the Vietnam War, both near and far from Paris, recalls ‘the Chinese strategy of encircling places of power’,¹¹ it also played a more important role than China in catalyzing and unifying a generation. *Half a Life* (*Mourir à 30 ans*, Romain Goupil, 1982) an autobiographical documentary, later showed the impact of this war among the young generations between 1965 and 1975.¹²

The 1960s and 1970s also coincided with a major attempt to erase any notion of the author in favour of a collective and revolutionary practice. The problem is equivalent to that of the writer facing his reader: how can the spectator be placed at the centre of a collective interrogation? As *La Chinoise* illustrates, film for Godard represented a specific mode of course, which he continued between 1969 and 1972 in a series of other films such as *Wind from the East* (*Vent d’Est*), *Pravda, Vladimir and Rosa* (*Vladimir et Rosa*), within the Dziga Vertov collective (1968-1972) that he had founded with Jean-Pierre Gorin and Jean-Henri Roger.¹³ Apart from its obvious failure, *La Chinoise* marked the beginning of a rupture and Maoist radicalization for Godard, which culminated in *Wind from the East* in 1970. Godard claimed to make films differently, seeking also to rebuild the filmmaker’s social function within the Dziga Vertov collective. The Cultural Revolution was no longer perceived as an event that had been lived or as an event to live; it was already mythologized, allowing Godard to

⁹ See Alain Jouffroy, ‘Le guerillo et le savant’, *Le Fait public*, 2 (1969) <<http://derives.tv/le-guerillero-et-le-savant>> [accessed 11 February 2018].

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ Jalabert Laurent, ‘Aux origines de la génération 1968: les étudiants français et la guerre du Vietnam’, *Vingtième siècle. Revue d’histoire* 55.1 (1997), 69–81.

¹² Romain Goupil, *Interviews with Bernard Lefort* (Paris: Punctum, 2005). Later, a handful of fictional films gave an idea of what the uprising was actually like, such as *Regular Lovers* (*Les Amants réguliers*, Philippe Garrel 2005), *Something in the Air* (*Après Mai*, Olivier Assayas, 2012).

¹³ Later, Jean-Henri Roger founded another group, Cinelutte (1973-1976), and taught at the University Paris 8. See David Faroult and Gérard Leblanc, *Mai 68 ou le cinéma en suspens* (Tarascon: Syllepses, 1998); *Voyages en utopie Jean-Luc Godard, 1946-2006*, ed. by Nicole Brenez (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 2006).

rebuild this posture around a film in the making. In some ways, this is true of *La Chinoise*, as evidenced by its discontinuous soundtrack. The New Wave had already been buried for several years, and for Godard, the Cultural Revolution was synonymous with a new revolution of the image, which banked on scandal, espousing the political situation. He had already done something similar in *The Little Soldier* (*Le Petit soldat*, 1963), which was censored during the Algerian War, and *Pierrot le fou* (1965), which was prohibited to people under the age of 18. The stinging competition of the cinema market, fuelled by the rise of television, forced Godard into the cultivated posture as a cursed artist, doomed to constantly revive himself on the social scene in order to continue to exist and produce.

When *La Chinoise* was released, the French press (*Le Nouvel Observateur*, *Combat*, *Cahiers du cinéma*, *Le Monde*...) responded favourably to the film. To critics, Godard was almost prophetic in his retrospective re-reading of a history in the making.¹⁴ Together with the rather hostile right-wing press, the Chinese Embassy in Paris, in utter disbelief at the excessive calls to violence, reacted negatively to the film. In retrospect, this film — if not the international context and lack of knowledge of China in France at the time — can be read as dithering and unfinished, halfway between propaganda and parody. Screened only in Paris at the time, the film sold some 100,000 tickets upon its release — actually a good outcome for an auteur film in a very competitive market — it was undermined by the release of films like *Don't Look Now... We're Being Shot At!* (*La Grande vadrouille*, Gérard Oury, 1966), emblematic of a popular success with more than 17 million tickets as well as several reruns.

However, should Godard's convictions or positions with regard to the Cultural Revolution be measured retrospectively more as anti-Americanism than an affiliation with Maoism, within the climate of the era and his public sympathy during the Langlois Affair at the French Cinémathèque and the French Cinema's States-General in May 1968? For Antoine de Baecque, the filmmaker was still more determined by economic conditions than by any precise ideology, passing from one fascination to another.¹⁵

Can Dialectics Break Bricks?

A member of the Situationist International who had studied Chinese at the National Institute for Oriental Languages and Civilizations, René Viénet was one of the first in France to condemn Chinese communism, observing that

¹⁴ See for example Jean de Baroncelli, 'La Chinoise de Jean-Luc Godard: un film qui "eclipse" tous les autres', *Le Monde*, 6 September 1967, p. 16.

¹⁵ Antoine de Baecque, *Godard* (Paris: Grasset, 2010), p. 351. See also Raphaël Jaudon, 'Une politique sans théorie? Marxisme et émancipation dans le cinéma politique du Groupe Dziga Vertov' (unpublished Master's thesis, Université Lyon 2, 2013).

‘official Chinese newspapers themselves did not give an account of the Cultural Revolution that was as watered down as the one proposed by sinologists and Western journalists’.¹⁶ As early as October 1967, spurred by Viénet, Guy Debord published a brochure, *The Explosion Point of Ideology in China*, as a counterpoint to the discourse of Western intellectuals and Maoist splinter groups of the time.¹⁷ In February 1971, Viénet left the Situationist International, but maintained friendly ties with Debord. In 1973, inspired by Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle*,¹⁸ he produced a few films with *détourned* soundtracks: the aforementioned *Can Dialectics Break Bricks?*, a pastiche of the Cultural Revolution based on a martial arts film, *Girls of Kamare* (*Les Filles de Ka-ma-ré*, 1974), which applied the same process to a pornographic film, and *Peking Duck Soup* (*Chinois, encore un effort pour être révolutionnaires*, 1977), featuring the Maoist propaganda rituals and delusional cult of Mao. These films can probably be best considered as an indirect response to both the first aphorisms of Godard’s *La Chinoise* and the place of China on the French far left’s cultural scene in the Mao-Stalinist era.

In *Can Dialectics Break Bricks?* the relationship between cinema and politics was also of interest but in a diametrically opposed way than in Godard’s *La Chinoise*. Using images from a pre-existing film (*The Crush*), *Can Dialectics Break Bricks?* seems more akin to a form of Pop Art, a nod to Andy Warhol and his ironic, colourful portrait of Mao (1973) splashed on posters all over the world. The film enjoyed the great popularity of Hong Kong films distributed in France at the time. *The Crush* told the struggle of young Koreans against the Japanese imperialists, the revolt of kung fu fighters against supporters of kendo. Viénet *détourns* this original narrative to show the spontaneous revolt of the masses against the bureaucracy which seized the revolution to oppress the masses. The sinologist revisits Cultural Revolution thematics, *détourning* them from their contexts — just like Godard’s *La Chinoise* — knowingly and ironically from beginning to end, ‘in a region occupied by bureaucrats, logicians will avenge the Commies and the Bonnot band’ (as one of the characters states in the movie).

Can Dialectics Break Bricks? proposes new montages between soundtrack and image, prefiguring commentary on the image. In *détourning* a popular Hong Kong karate film, Viénet also parodies Maoist logorrhea. The shifts between soundtrack and image create comical situations. The subtitles are false translations of dialogue where a lovers’ exchange becomes a critical

¹⁶ Simon Leys, *Essais sur la Chine* (Paris: R. Laffont, 1998). On the meeting between the Belgian Catholic sinologist and the French situationist, see Laurent Six, ‘Aux origines d’*Ombres chinoises*: une mission de six mois au service de l’ambassade de Belgique en République populaire de Chine’, *Textyles*, 34 (2008) <<http://journals.openedition.org/textyles/1572>> [accessed 5 May 2017].

¹⁷ Guy Debord, ‘The Explosion Point of Ideology in China’, *Internationale Situationniste*, 11 (1967), 499–508.

¹⁸ Guy Debord, *La Société du spectacle*, trans. by Fredy Perlman and John Supak (Detroit: Black & Red, 1970).

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consideration of decadent Trotskyism, or, in silent scenes, a denunciation of capitalist exploitation. The movie's opening titles read:

The first entirely *détourned* film in the history of cinema, a toast to the exploited for the extermination of the exploiters, an epitaph for friends [*les copains*] where all films can be *détourned*, duds [*les navets*] as well as Pasolinis, Vardas, Godards, Bergmans, but also Spaghetti Westerns and commercial films, at the cinema where the producer is alienated and has no control over his life. This will change but not by voting for the common program or by joining the PSU...!

The traditional Chinese imagery on screen distorts Maoist thought, and is as much a criticism of the despotic communist universe as it is of capitalist domination ('Speak no more of class struggles, or I'll send you my sociologists, my psychiatrist, or even a structuralist'), for 'while we may well be the dominant class, we are often in the shit'. The film's dialectical mode works in an often rudimentary opposition of good and bad. It remains, nevertheless, true to the narrative structure of popular kung fu films, attacking all forms of alienation in an anarchist vein. Having targeted the permanently criticized bureaucrats, Viénet turns to the accomplices of intellectual alienation in France — 'those idiots who observe and see nothing', as one character puts it in the movie — revisiting, in this way, the failure of the world's revolutionary movements. In highlighting the archaisms of allegedly revolutionary discourse, *Can Dialectics Break Bricks?* plays with words and becomes a counterpoint to Godard's *La Chinoise*, which by 1973, already appeared aged and fairly conformist. However, for Viénet, an informed sinologist breaking with the decaying situationist movement, filming *Politics* contributed to the creation of new political alternatives. It was a question of breaking with the dominant order in light of his knowledge of the Cultural Revolution's devastating effects in order to criticize militant and media blindness in France.

Charting the limits of the Cultural Revolution in a polemical, pamphleteer fashion, Viénet's film remained confined to intellectual circles. Yet in 1973, the revolutionary process itself was winded and most militant groups had dissolved. The same year, *Libération* was launched by Serge July, a former Maoist, as a morning and daily newspaper supported by Jean-Paul Sartre. A political page had turned in France, restoring conservative power and strengthening the Gaullist state institutions that had been disparaged and weakened since May 1968. Charles De Gaulle left office in 1969, and Georges Pompidou died in 1974. In France, the controversial publication in 1974 of Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* (1973) put Soviet (rather than Chinese) totalitarianism in the spotlight. In 1975, André Glucksmann's *La Cuisinière et le mangeur d'hommes* [The Cook and the Man-Eater] was published.¹⁹ Glucksmann defected from the

¹⁹ André Glucksmann, *La Cuisinière et le mangeur d'hommes* (Paris: Seuil, 1975).

French Communist Party and joined the Maoist movement and the Proletarian Left in 1968-1969. After reading Solzhenitsyn, he opened the debate on the post-left and the responsibilities of Marxism in his essay on the State and concentration camps. A number of French intellectuals (Cornélius Castoriadis, Michel Foucault, and Claude Lefort, to name only a few) had already relayed such ideas after the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, but little attention was paid to them.²⁰ Jean Pasqualini's *Prisoner of Mao* was translated in French in 1975, describing the author's own seven-year experience of forced labour, after having been accused of being a counter-revolutionary during the Hundred Flowers Campaign.²¹

Upon its release, *Can Dialectics Break Bricks?* was regarded as being rather non-conformist. It was screened in a handful of art house cinemas in the Latin Quarter, and it did not enjoy the publicity and aura of a confirmed director that *La Chinoise* had a few years prior. In the shadow of Guy Debord, Viénet was largely unknown, despite his academic reputation in Chinese studies. His film allowed him to make a radical critique of the society of spectacle using the very tools of spectacle; it presents a few commonalities with *La Chinoise*. In both films, almost messianic visuals illustrate the mythical idea of saving a people from alienation, using the fashionable concept of 'contradictions' (those of capitalism and those of Chinese communism) dialectically. Viénet's film resonates quotes and slogans led astray, most likely those of an educational cinema that complied with Maoist precepts of the time. Amidst sabres and karate, anathema transform into an oratorical sparring match, merrily refuting falsehood with truth in opposition to Chinese realities, with no real interest in a chronological history of current events in mainland China. In both films, the traditional film narrative is disrupted in favour of supposedly more innovative forms, so as to present ever abstract theses. First and foremost, both films were primarily intended for a small, informed French audience and they remained exterior to any historical treatment. Through essentially political questions, these films raise issues of political representation in a reified society of spectacle. Further, in both cases the commentary carries more weight than the images. In *Can Dialectics Break Bricks?*, this questioning paradoxically comes from Hong Kong, from a China that was simultaneously urban, rural and Communist. Although the images were *détourned* and parodied, like Godard, Viénet sought to challenge the spectator. His comments distanced the ideas of Mao, the heir of Confucianism, and condemn domineering capitalism. Viénet depicts a set

²⁰ See Florence Grandsenne, 'Les intellectuels français face aux crises du communisme en Europe du Centre-Est (1956-1981)', *Labyrinthe*, 7 (2000); Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* (London: Penguin Press, 2005); Jeannine Verdès Ledoux, *Au service du Parti: Le parti communiste, les intellectuels et la culture (1944-1956)* (Paris: Fayard, 1983).

²¹ Jean Pasqualini, Rudolph Chelminski, *Prisoner of Mao* (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1973).

of opposites such as text/image or criticism/self-criticism, unveiling these 'contradictions' in the Maoist sense of the term. This inversion of principles updates the ideological mechanisms of a totalitarian system of thought.

A Posteriori Chinese Views

Broadly, Chinese cinema has ignored the Cultural Revolution or continued to censor this period partially, without consistently providing historical or visual documentation. Chinese television avoids addressing this censored topic, contributing to a general amnesia. There are far more literary productions on the question of the Cultural Revolution. The majority of related film production constitutes a few independent documentaries, featuring filmed testimonies. On the other hand, some critical documentaries have been broadcast on Hong Kong channels. As early as 1993, post-Maoist films participated in the implementation of a specific — but also very fragmentary — audio-visual writing, which could allow for an in-depth overhaul of the past and its many gaps. This marginal cinema nevertheless maintains a sensitive relationship with written history and the testimonies of Chinese totalitarianism. They provide a counterpoint to the ever-dominant national narrative.²² Aside from a very partial, fictional reconstruction of these events, only about a dozen attempts at the margins of documentary production have been made: a fairly weak corpus of films considering that China produces nearly 500 films a year. Where fiction film fails, these few documentary films strive to act as a counter-memory to official speeches in China yesterday and today, to illustrate the abuses committed. Finally, in Europe, although there are many archival images, precious few documentary filmmakers have treated this chapter of world history. Philip Short, the BBC's Beijing correspondent, who also wrote biographies of Mao and of Pol Pot, contributed by way of a four-part documentary *Mao, une histoire chinoise* (2006) co-authored and directed by Adrien Maben for Arte.²³

A few Sixth-Generation film directors including Jia Zhangke, Wang Xiaoshuai and Wang Bing have produced Chinese fiction films on the topic. These directors offer a critical vision of China, which differs in any case from those given by

²² Amongst others, these films include *1966, My Time in the Red Guards* (1966, *Wo de hongweibing shidai*, Wu Wenguang, 1993); Hu Jie's films, *Though I Am Gone* (*Wo sui si qu*, 2006), *Searching for Lin Zhao's Soul* (*Xunzhaobao Lin Zhao de linghun*, 2006), and *Mother Wang Peiyong* (*Wo de muqin Wang Peiyong*, 2011); the archival footage film, *Storm under the Sun* (*Hong ri fengbao*, Peng Xiaolian and S. Louisa Wei, 2009); the docu-fiction *Mr Zhang Believes* (*Chi*, Qiu Jiongjiong, 2015); *To Justify Bu Qinfu* (*Huan Bu Qinfu yi meili*, Wang Yunlong and Han Yi, 2011); Xu Xin's films, *Pathway* (*Daolu*, 2011), *My Cultural Revolution* (*Wo de wenge biannianshi*, 2014) and *Summary of Crimes* (*Zuixing zhaiyao*, 2014); and *Farewell, Beijing* (*Zaijian Beijing*, Zhang Tianhui, 2009).

²³ See René Viénet, 'Arrêts sur images', *Le Figaro*, 7 September 2006 <http://www.lefigaro.fr/debats/2006/09/07/01005-20060907ARTWWW90420-mao_arrêts_sur_images.php> [accessed 11 March 2018].

the Maoist propaganda and the few (and often romanticized) historical re-enactments.²⁴ Many Sixth-Generation films that have been censored in China such as Wang's *11 Flowers* (*Wo 11*, 2011) and *Red Amnesia* (*Chuangru zhe*, 2014), have reappeared in international festivals. More recently, Zhang Yimou's film, *Coming Home* (*Guilai*, 2014), follows the itinerary of a father returning from a labour camp at the end of the Cultural Revolution, confronted by his amnesiac family. This film was expected to represent China at the Oscars, but it did not. These films had little distribution in China, if any at all.

On another note, Wang's *The Ditch* (*Jiabiangou*, Wang Bing, 2010), was chosen to be the *film sorpresa* in the 2010 Venice Film Festival. at the Venice Film Festival. Though the film is structured around a true filmic writing, it remains marginal on the audio-visual landscape of Chinese fictional cinema, both in terms of the point of view of its content and its form. Realized with an economy of means and filmed most often with direct sound and all the vagaries of a pale light behind closed doors, Wang's cinema is difficult to understand. The image here serves as a 'chiaroscuro' mode of observation. It is a question of filming everything before all traces disappear or are erased.

Wang had already filmed *Fengming: A Chinese Memoir* (*He Fengming*, 2007) in mostly static shots with minimalist montage. This three-hour long film is the account of a former journalist and survivor of the re-education camps. Wang's cinema is symptomatic of a story written from the bottom up. In symbolic fashion, he summons all those who were excluded, every victim of the Maoist experience, and films them, providing them, at last, an opportunity to speak. *Fengming: A Chinese Memoir* is a documentary that anticipates the subsequent writing of Wang's only fiction *The Ditch*, itself at the crossroads of documentary. Wang travelled all over China to record these testimonies, in search of survivors and families of the victims of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. He met Fengming whose husband died of hunger at the Jiabiangou camp on the edge of Mongolia. Prior to filming *The Ditch*, Wang filmed Fengming's account from narrated stories and tight frames. She evokes the advent of the communist regime in 1949, the anti-rightist campaigns, and her confinement in a labour re-education camp before her rehabilitation in 1978, after the Cultural Revolution.

In this way, *The Ditch* revisits, in a fictitious fashion, the effects of the Maoist repressive system. The challenge is to reconstruct the traces of a visual history in a society that has become amnesic about these issues, without reducing this period to the camps. Wang was inspired by a collection of short stories, chronicling the internment and the tragic destinies of those accused of rightism and betrayal of the Communist Party and sent to re-education camps during the Great Leap Forward, between 1950 and 1960. *The Ditch* is adapted from the 2003 novel *Farewell to Jiabiangou* (*Gaobie Jiabiangou*, Yang Xianhui) which counts roughly

²⁴ Luisa Prudentino and Kuo-Quiemelle, 'Du cinéma réaliste au cinéma de propagande dans la Chine maoïste', in *Une histoire mondiale des cinémas de propagande*, ed. by Jean-Pierre Bertin-Maghit (Paris: Nouveau monde, 2008), pp. 661–680.

nineteen testimonies. This novel was published the same year in France under the title *Le Chant des martyrs: Dans les camps de la mort de la Chine de Mao* [The Song of Martyrs: In the Death Camps of Mao's China].²⁵ The filmmaker revisits the evocative power of speech to stage a taboo story in China, visually examined from the perspective of the victims. This period is as little discussed as that of the Cultural Revolution. However, it makes it possible to better understand this historical continuity by producing an anti-hero cinema at the antipodes of Chinese film propaganda of the time. The film is based on a series of questions about this tragedy in a perspective that limits the use of archival images based on testimonies collected from the deportees, their families and the guards.²⁶

Focusing on the victims, this film, shot in the Gobi Desert in extreme climatic and material conditions, fictitiously depicts hidden memories. The film is about the Hundred Flowers campaign, which began in 1957, and anticipates the Chinese Cultural Revolution ten years later. It also openly criticizes the blockages of the State-Party. This campaign against the right-wing movement also targeted those who dared to criticize Mao openly. The Great Leap Forward (1958-1960) implied forced industrialization with famines of great magnitude in the countryside where nearly 40 million people perished. During the Great Leap Forward, the camps — which did not necessarily refer to any criminal status — were based on the idea of a new re-education through work that corresponded to a political and social program that ensured the 'success' of communism. The Cultural Revolution trivialized the Leninist notion of 'class enemy' through re-education.²⁷ To measure further the gap between the written word and the images of the time, it would probably be necessary to consider the Cultural Revolution within the context of terror in China, beyond its ideological legacy. The film also deals with conflicts between the living and the dead behind closed doors, in a prisonlike environment, for instance, when a woman fights camp bureaucracy in order to give her husband a decent burial.

Can this inhuman reality become human? Echoing Simone de Beauvoir's slightly unorthodox position: 'In China, man is tearing himself away from his immanence in order to understand what is human'.²⁸ Wang Bing's cinema mirrors the madness of a system and its discontinuity in history, from the Great Leap Forward to the Cultural Revolution. In *'Til Madness Do Us Part (Feng'ai*, 2013), he uses raw images, describing the universe of the excluded through their daily lives in a psychiatric hospital in Yunnan. It is his way of restoring not only an individuality that was denied by the system, but also a humanity beyond the prison for individuals with no future. A few decades later, these Chinese films

²⁵ See Caroline Renard, Isabelle Anselme and François Amy de la Bretèque, *Wang Bing, un cinéaste en Chine aujourd'hui* (Aix-en-Provence: Presses universitaires de Provence, 2014).

²⁶ See Jean-Michel Frodon, 'Dans l'enfer du goulag chinois', *Slate FR*, 8 March 2012 <<http://www.slate.fr/story/51101/fengming-fosse-goulag-chinois-cinema>> [accessed 11 March 2018].

²⁷ See Patrick Cotelette, 'Wang Bing, *Le Fossé* et *Fengming*. *Chronique d'une femme chinoise*', *Lectures*, 7 January 2013 <<http://lectures.revues.org/10303>> [accessed 11 March 2018].

²⁸ Simone de Beauvoir, 'Témoignage à charge', *Les Temps modernes*, 127-128 (1956), 297-319.

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give perspective to the initial remarks on the present and future of the Cultural Revolution in Jean-Luc Godard's *La Chinoise* and René Viénet's *Can Dialectics Break Bricks?*. As a counterpoint, these posterior Chinese views establish an inverted model of French fiction films in the 1960s and 1970s, avoiding the central question of politics so as to decipher a utopia based on a devastating ideology,²⁹ by retrospectively revisiting its consequences through an anonymous social history. Through their intersecting viewpoints, these recent Chinese films provide a means to challenge certain intangible assumptions about political history in a yet closed China, as well as to measure the effects or impacts of the Cultural Revolution that are known today.

²⁹ Wang Bing, *Alors, la Chine? Entretien avec Emmanuel Burdeau et Eugenio Renzi* (Paris: Les Prairies ordinaires, 2014).