Looking at / Looking in Antonioni's *Chung Kuo, Cina*: A Critical Reflection Across Three Viewings

Dan Edwards March 2015 Feature Articles Issue 74

Feature image: Plate spinners at work in Shanghai, 1972, in Antonioni's *Chung kuo, Cina* (1972).

I want to be there, in that audience in 1972, watching those plate spinners and their amazing feats of derring-do. I want to laugh and gasp at their act in the moment, feel the presence of those twirling poles, the swish of the turning plates as they slow and threaten to slip from their state of centrifugal suspension. I want to live in the dream of those images.

What is it about the final sequence of Michelangelo Antonioni's documentary *Chung kuo, Cina* (*China*, 1972) that makes me feel this way? I've seen the film in its three-hour-forty-minute entirety three times over the past twelve years, and each time this last sequence fills me with a joy, fascination and wonder I find hard to explain. But then, while these emotions reach a crescendo in these final few minutes, they are building from the moment the film opens on a day in late spring on Tiananmen Square, framing faces, looks, expressions and movements from a time just before I was born, in a country where such scenes, at that time, were almost never recorded. It is their rarity, perhaps, that made these pictures appear so beautifully fragile and precious even when I knew almost nothing of the country and culture they depict.

My fascination with *Chung kuo* has not diminished, but my relationship with the film has certainly shifted in other ways across three viewings, just as my relationship with China itself has changed. When I first saw the film in Sydney back in the early 2000s, I knew very little about China and identified closely with the wide-eyed traveller's perspective Antonioni evokes through his somewhat detached, observational lens. His images so enthralled me they added considerable impetus to my long-held desire to visit the country, which I did for the first time shortly after. Although I now look at the film through the filter of four years living in Beijing and numerous other visits to China, my admiration for Antonioni's documentary has, if anything, increased.

In some ways *Chung kuo* tells us little about the People's Republic of the late Maoist era in which it was shot, and the easy-going, chatty Italian voiceover narration contains numerous factual inaccuracies.(1) The film does, however, convey a certain kind of knowledge – or perhaps more precisely, an *experience* – of the time in which it was shot that is available via almost no other sources. The particular experience *Chung kuo* represents also helps us understand something of the wildly varying responses the film has provoked, from the hyperbolic denunciation in print, speech and deed by the Chinese state in the mid-1970s, to warm exclamations of recognition from some contemporary Chinese viewers.(2)

The First Look

Accounts vary as to how Antonioni – best known for challenging tales of the search for meaning in the prosperous urban environments of post-war Italy – came to make a documentary in China during the Cultural Revolution. Seymour Chatman claims that, "When the Chinese decided to solicit a Western film about their country, they compiled a list of the world's leading filmmakers, and from that list they chose

Antonioni."(3) Sun Hongyun, in contrast, claims that the Italian state broadcaster RAI made the first approach, contacting the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs via letter.(4) What is not in doubt is that the invitation extended to the Italian filmmaker was part of wider moves by the Chinese leadership in the early 1970s to re-establish diplomatic contacts with the West.(5)

Links with the outside world had been limited since the Communist takeover of mainland China at the end of the Chinese civil war in 1949. The souring of Sino-Soviet relations in the late 1950s, following Mao's opposition to Khrushchev's "de-Stalinisation" program and policy of peaceful coexistence with the West, left the People's Republic of China almost completely isolated internationally. The early years of the Cultural Revolution, launched by Mao in mid-1966, were characterised by bellicose anti-imperialist rhetoric directed towards both the United States and Soviet Union.(6) In the early 1970s, Mao permitted the relatively moderate premier, Zhou Enlai, to launch a range of initiatives designed to signal tentative reengagement with the West. When Antonioni arrived in China in May 1972 for a 22-day, carefully guided tour from Beijing to Shanghai via Suzhou, Nanjing and parts of the countryside in Henan Province, he was one of the first non-Chinese filmmakers to shoot in the country since the 1950s.

Michelangelo Antonioni (centre) shooting in China during the making of *Chung kuo, Cina*.

Chung kuo clearly evokes this first moment of contact for the Italian director with an utterly foreign culture. Antonioni's culture shock and sense of estrangement from the people around him were, of course, greatly intensified by China's prolonged isolation and the fact that his journey was strictly supervised and watched by the authorities. He outlines the position he and his crew found themselves in during their three-week stay early in the film, when the first-person voiceover intones:

> *We're not pretending to understand China. All we hope for is to present a large collection of faces, gestures, customs. Arriving from Europe we thought of exploring mountains and deserts. But the fact is, most of China remains inaccessible and forbidden. Even though, in a game of political pong-pong, the Chinese have opened a few doors, with an unflinching persistence, our guides keep us from taking a step away from the prescribed itineraries.*

From the opening moments, then, *Chung kuo* is framed as a look, a peek, a glance at a country long cut off from Western eyes. Antonioni acknowledges a particular perspective – that of the foreign visitor tracing a circumscribed journey – and makes no claims of historical or intellectual knowledge or insight. "We're not pretending to understand China," the narrator states flatly. Instead, from the outset he signals a concern with the appearance of people and things.

The film opens on Tiananmen Square in Beijing, with a style that sets the tone for much of what is to follow. After the stirring opening bars of the Cultural Revolution-era children's song *Wo ai Beijing Tiananmen* (*I Love Beijing Tiananmen*) over the title credits, the camera frames a couple with a baby and a People's Liberation Army soldier standing on Tiananmen Square, staring straight into the lens. The camera zooms in slightly to frame the group more tightly as they return the camera's gaze. There is no fear or apprehension discernable in their look. If anything, they exude a quiet confidence in the face of the foreigner's stare.

The camera pans left to reveal the trio is part of a queue. Later we see they are lining up to have their pictures taken posing in front of Tiananmen – the gate overlooking the square – by a professional photographer. There is a cut to two young women framed in close-up. They chat as they steal glances over their shoulders at the lens and the odd-looking outsiders no doubt huddled behind it. They appear shy but curious. Perhaps a little flirtatious. Other young women simply gaze into the camera in the succeeding shots, without a flicker of fear, curiosity, resentment or self-consciousness. They are simply there, at home on the square, observing the strange figures in their midst as one might fix on a monument of passing interest.

The opening shot on Beijing's Tiananmen Square, beneath Chinese characters spelling out the film's title.

During my first trip to the People's Republic, I was struck by the degree to which the experience of being stared at – sometimes furtively, sometimes so openly it was physically confronting – remained central to the experience of non-Chinese travelling in China. This kind of staring is much less common these days in major metropolises like Beijing, but even towards the end of my time living in the capital in 2011, it was not unusual for internal migrant workers newly arrived in the city to place themselves centimetres from my face on the subway and stare with frank, unblinking amazement. The powerful sense of being a foreign curiosity remains a thread linking Antonioni's experience as expressed in his film with the experience of non-Chinese visiting China today.

Alice Xiang writes perceptively of the vast array of visual exchanges that take place between the camera and the people of China as *Chung kuo* unfolds at its leisurely pace across nearly four hours and three chapters.(7) While some commentators, such as Rey Chow, have written of the way the Chinese people in the film treat the camera "as an alien object before which they tend to feel guarded, self-conscious and in need of protection,"(8) Xiang detects a reciprocity in the constant exchange of looks that renders the stare of both the camera and its on-screen subjects "distinct from the one-sided, often disciplinary or hierarchical gaze."(9) The film's opening shots, described above, provides a good example of the range of visual exchanges on display. There is the even, frontal curiosity of the first trio of faces to fill the screen, the coquettish glances of some of the young women, the bored indifference of other young girls. Later, especially in the countryside, there is a

great deal of surprise and nervousness exhibited by many peasants when the Italian director and his crew stumble unannounced into a remote village, but there is little evidence of the "terror" described by some.(10) Rather, in the way villagers sneak up for a view of the aliens in their midst, and dive out of view when the lens swings their way, we witness a fascinating act of refusal – a look, and look away. Even one of the village pigs turns its rear-end towards the camera and lets forth a stream of urine in response to Antonioni's prying eyes. This is the opposite of the anthropological filmic gaze that seeks to explain and fix meaning through the act of image capture. Here, meaning – as Antonioni stresses in his voiceover – is always uncertain, subjective, skin deep and constantly slipping out of frame.

Sun Hongyun unfavourably compares Antonioni's observational approach in *Chung kuo* with that of the Dutch communist filmmaker Joris Ivens and his collaborator Marceline Loridan, in their epic 12-part documentary *How Yukong Moved the Mountains*.(11) Shot from the early to mid-1970s, *Yukong* lasts for nearly thirteen hours and was finished as the era it depicts came to a close with Mao's death in 1976. Parts of the film – notably "The Pharmacy," an 81-minute portrait of life inside a state-owned Shanghai chemist – rely heavily on interviews with ordinary Chinese. While "Ivens and Loridan orientated their camera to people who were talking," Sun argues that Antonioni's estranged stare is characterised by a calmness that at times slides into "callousness."(12)

There is no doubt that Antonioni adopts a position that conveys a sense of both physical proximity to, and cultural distance from, the people and places he films. This tension is central to the traveller's perspective the film is built upon, and is intensified for non-Chinese speakers by the lack of subtitling for the snatches of Chinese dialogue we hear on the soundtrack. However, it is highly problematic in the context of Mao's China to assume that Ivens and Loridan were able to produce "a kind of perception instead of observation" simply by talking to people, as Sun claims.(13)

Put simply, Sun never poses the question of what kind of public speech was possible during the totalitarian culture of the Maoist period – particularly during the Cultural Revolution years when intense persecution of anyone who questioned Mao's authority was the norm. Ivens and Loridan were filming just a few years after the violent convulsions that shook China through the initial years of the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to the end of that decade, that killed hundreds of thousands, possibly millions, of people.(14) As is now well documented, a word spoken out of turn could have dire consequences during this period not only for the speaker, but for his or her entire family. The scene in *Yukong*'s "The Pharmacy"in which we see the former owner of the chemist speaking about how happy he is working under his former employees in the nationalised shop is emblematic in this regard. Where those sympathetic to Mao's project in the 1970s no doubt saw proof of the benevolent happiness his reforms had bestowed upon China, contemporary viewers can only wonder at the intense pressures and likely violence this former "capitalist roader" must have endured in the decades since 1949. Clearly, he was not about to share the full range of his experiences with a foreign filmmaker selected by the regime to reveal the "truth" about China.(15)

This is why, for me, Antonioni's *Chung kuo* is a far more honest work, despite its openly declared position of detachment from what it frames. Ivens and Loridan's film is no doubt an honest document of what they saw and heard during their protracted stay in China, but we now know far more about what was happening outside the purview of their camera, throwing much of what they show into question. Antonioni was conscious he was seeing only the surface reality of Mao's China, and made a film about his encounter with that surface, foregrounding his limited viewpoint. As he notes towards the end of the documentary, "China has opened its doors, but it still remains a distant and largely unknown world. We've given it but a single glance… You can depict people's faces, but not their hearts." Ivens and Loridan's *Yukong* implies a deeper, insider's knowledge, but never questions the surface reality with which the filmmakers were presented. It is precisely for this reason that the contemporary Chinese documentarian Wu Wenguang compared the experience of watching *Yukong* to seeing an "old scar in the mirror" – a confrontation with the memory of the forced enactment of a largely illusory world.(16)

Seeing the everyday

Antonioni does not just film encounters with faces of course. He also framed street scenes in the major cities he visited, as well as a glimpse of life working the land in China's countryside in the central province of Henan. The overall physical appearance of China's cities, and much of its countryside, has been utterly transformed since 1972, but because Antonioni and his crew were mainly restricted to older tourist sites such as Tiananmen Square, the Forbidden City and Shanghai's riverside Bund, a surprising number of the places he filmed remain instantly recognisable some 40 years later. In fact, it was the resemblances to contemporary China that most forcefully struck me when I saw the film for a second time, roughly half way through my four years living in Beijing.

During that viewing, the links between then and now began with the opening credits. By this time I was married to a Chinese woman, who watched the film with me on a computer screen in our Beijing apartment. As the spritely strains of *Wo ai Beijing Tiananmen* burst from the speakers, my wife began singing along. The song, it seems, was still being sung by children when she started school during the late 1980s.

As the film progressed, it became apparent that the song was not the only link with the past lingering in the present. It was striking how much remained unchanged in people's everyday habits and ways of moving in public spaces. When Antonioni shows us workers playing cards in the shade of the Ming Tombs outside Beijing, they slap down each card with exactly the same demonstrative bravado I observed amongst players in the alleys around our apartment block. And people still unselfconsciously lean over players' shoulders to watch the games, just as Antonioni recorded. Workers at the state-owned magazine I worked at for two years in Beijing still lined up once a day for mass exercises, as we see on the streets of Shanghai in part three of the film. And urban retirees continue to use any patch of public space they can find to stretch, dance, shadow box and socialise in, just as they did in 1972.

Workers exercise as a group on the streets of Shanghai in *Chung kuo, Cina.*

At the same time there have been, of course, countless surface changes in the spaces Antonioni filmed. Tiananmen Square looks similar today, but it appears much vaster in the film without Mao's Mausoleum splitting the space, as it has since 1977. Where visitors are now

confronted with giant digital screens, Maoist banners once stood. And of the Communist hall of fame that once lined the square in the form of portraits of Mao, Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin, only Mao remains.

The shopping strip of Beijing's Wangfujing is quite recognisable in the film too, but sans the McDonald's and other "imperialist" fast food outlets that now attract Beijingers in their thousands. Much of Shanghai's colonial architecture along the riverfront and the main thoroughfare of Nanjing Lu also remains intact, but in *Chung kuo* the walls of the buildings appear strangely denuded without the ubiquitous neon now covering every façade in Shanghai's centre.

Other scenes from the film linger as ghostly after-images in today's cityscapes. Antonioni tracks past hundreds of bicycles parked beside the Temple of Heaven in Beijing, a scene echoed in the shelters jammed with dozens of abandoned, rusting bike frames beside every old apartment block in today's capital – testament to Chinese people's enthusiastic embrace of car ownership over the past two decades. All of these changes made evident by Antonioni's film are physically superficial, yet they signal seismic shifts in China's politics, economic system and social organisation since 1972.

In short, *Chung kuo* during my second viewing offered the curious experience of seeing an unfamiliar version of familiar places. Watching the film in my Beijing apartment, it felt like I was watching an alien way of life superimposed on the urban landscape outside my window. Of course, this sense of disjunction occurs when observing aging images of any familiar space. But Antonioni's images are special – and startling for those who know the places he filmed – because they are so rare. Chinese feature filmmaking virtually ceased during the Cultural Revolution, while documentary production was the exclusive domain of state-controlled studios, producing works in which carefully staged images were accompanied by monological voiceovers conveying highly didactic narrations promoting Maoist ideology.(17) *Chung kuo* offers one of the few filmic records of what China looked like in 1972 that is not framed by the political imperatives that completely dominated Chinese arts at the time.(18) Antonioni focused on the everyday moments he was able to snatch during his prescribed journey that never made it into the official imagery of the period. Moments like a man gliding effortlessly through a Beijing street on his bicycle while practicing *tai-chi*, or a couple surreptitiously enjoying a quiet huddle together in a corner of the Forbidden City. As Alice Xiang notes, instants such as these "would never be part of official histories, and this, in the context of 1970s China, meant that for the most part they would never enter any sort of material history."(19) This is likely one of the reasons why certain figures in the leadership instinctively despised Antonioni's film, for it offered up random, unplanned images of Chinese life that exceeded their carefully controlled aesthetic regime.

A Subtle Critique

Inexplicable as it now seems to many viewers, there is no doubting the vehemence of the Chinese regime's reaction to Antonioni's documentary when it appeared in the early 1970s. There was a nationwide mass campaign of denunciation, and numerous editorials, articles and even books were published in both Chinese and English attacking the film and filmmaker in the lurid political prose of the era.(20) The title of the best-known English language publication from the campaign – *A Vicious Motive, Despicable Tricks: A Criticism of M. Antonioni's Anti-China Film China* – gives some sense of the campaign's overblown rhetoric.(21) The opening paragraphs of the booklet describe *Chung kuo* as a "frenzied provocation" (surely the only time this adjective has been applied to Antonioni's work!) via which, through "underhand and utterly despicable means," Antonioni had "hunted specially for material that could be used to slander and attack China."(22) Like all totalitarian rhetoric when viewed outside the context in which it is produced, *A Vicious Motive* reads today as a rather amusing and utterly absurd piece of writing. It is also at times wildly inaccurate in its description of specific scenes from the film, a strategy the regime could deploy without fear of contradiction since no ordinary Chinese people were permitted to actually see *Chung kuo* at the time.

One troubling aspect of the way Antonioni's film was discussed in the early 1970s, and continues to be discussed today in both China and the West, is the recurring references to the response of "the Chinese people." The *Vicious Motive* booklet blithely announces that, "Any Chinese with any national pride cannot but be greatly angered on seeing this film,"(23) while around the same time Umberto Eco attempted to analyse the film from "a Chinese point of view," by relying on the information of one Maoist Hong Kong film critic.(24) In a more recent article, the Hong Kong cultural critic Rey Chow explores the tensions that bedevil any discussion of Chinese culture between "native informants" and "foreign observers," before moving on to analyse the varying responses to Antonioni's film.(25) Chow holds back from exploring this potentially fertile terrain of critical enquiry, however, by reiterating the same kind of simplistic dichotomies that characterised both the official Chinese rhetoric and much of the Western musing on the controversy around *Chung kuo* in the 1970s. Specifically, she writes about the official condemnation of Antonioni's work as if it were the spontaneous response of a general Chinese audience, which she compares to non-Chinese reactions. In fact, one of the very curious aspects of most analyses of the vitriol directed at the documentary is the failure to acknowledge that only a tiny circle within the Chinese leadership actually saw the film. The subsequent mass campaign should be properly read as the response of the *leadership* – or perhaps more accurately, a *part* of the leadership – rather than some kind of spontaneous outpouring of emotion from "the Chinese people".

When we consider the history of other mass movements that were roughly congruent with the denunciation of Antonioni's film – such as the campaign against Confucianism that ran throughout the mid-1970s – there is ample reason to believe that the attack on *Chung kuo* was, like the campaign against Confucius, part of the bitter factional struggle between the Cultural Revolution Group led by Mao's wife Jiang Qing and the "moderates" represented by Premier Zhou Enlai.(26) It was Zhou who spearheaded China's cautious reengagement with the West in the early 1970s, and as already noted, Antonioni's visit was a part of these moves. It makes perfect sense in this context that Jiang Qing and her cohorts would attack Antonioni's film, as mass campaigns were regularly deployed by the Cultural Revolution Group as a means of undermining Zhou's power. This reading also suggests that *Chung kuo* would likely have been attacked *irrespective* of its actual content. The failure to grasp this point is understandable in Western writings of the mid-1970s, when little was understood about what was happening inside the Chinese leadership. It is less explicable in articles such as Chow's, written at a time when we know a great deal more about the workings of Mao's regime. It is especially troubling when a critic of Chow's stature can unselfconsciously write about the response of "China" and "the Chinese" as if these labels denote a unified, homogenous mass of hundreds of millions of people who all think and feel exactly the same thing. As Alice Xiang has shown, when ordinary Chinese people have had the chance to actually see Antonioni's film in recent years, via various public screenings, pirate DVDs and online viewings, their response has been every bit as varied as any other audience.(27)

Nevertheless, for all its absurdity, the mass campaign against Antonioni's film is an objective historical fact, prompting the question of *why* the regime (as opposed to "the Chinese") so utterly despised Antonioni's work. While it should be understood that the Cultural Revolution Group would likely have found something to attack in the film no matter what its style or content, Umberto Eco illuminates the basis of the criticisms they mounted through his analysis of the fundamentally different "symbolic superstructures" that were in place in Maoist China and 1970s Europe.(28) While Chinese Socialist Realism demanded teleological historiography, grand themes and ideal types who audiences were supposed to emulate, Antonioni strove for a filmic engagement with the surface reality of the everyday. It was precisely the "everyday" – with its prosaic problems, joys and struggles – that revolutionary art was supposed to transcend.

Yet when I watched *Chung kuo* a third time in preparation for this article, I discerned a very subtle strain of critique that I had not previously detected. Perhaps Jiang Qing and her comrades were not totally off the mark in claiming Antonioni's film was an affront to their totalitarian, utopian vision, even if they missed the actual elements of critique intended by the filmmaker in their search for examples of his alleged "viciousness."

One of *Chung kuo*'s most haunting and strange sequences sees the camera exploring a temple complex in Suzhou, packed, the voiceover tells us, with 500 statues of Buddha. Although we are informed the shrine is "a museum of the past, preserved as a curiosity," it seems extraordinary that such a large collection of religious paraphernalia in a major east coast city escaped the destructive ferocity of the early years of the Cultural Revolution. It seems even more extraordinary that Antonioni's guides let him enter the temple and film these decidedly un-Maoist relics.

The "museum" also appears utterly devoid of people, save for a young man and woman who gaze with stagey curiosity at the statues and friezes. As the woman looks up towards the camera, we cut to a reverse shot – the film's only moment in which the camera adopts the point of view of someone on screen. This sudden shift away from the perspective of the wandering, foreign *flâneur* only strengthens the sense that the sequence has been heavily staged. Who are these people and what is the real story behind this large collection of artefacts? Why does Antonioni unexpectedly include a point-of-view shot when the film is otherwise almost completely devoid of them? Was this the director's way of signalling that his guides insisted on the scene being shot in a particular manner? Does he give himself over to their point-of-view – literally – to indicate his own lack of understanding about what he was looking at? Answers to these questions could likely only be found by talking to those involved with the shoot. As it stands, the stilted interlude appears stylistically at odds with the rest of the film.

Gazing at religious relics with stagey curiosity in the Suzhou temple sequence of *Chung kuo, Cina.*

The temple sequence also contains the only moment in which the voiceover seems to proffer an indirect criticism of Maoism. Upon entering the temple, the narrator observes, "It's hard to believe that the religious sentiments have disappeared completely in a country that has been dominated for hundreds of years by the thoughts and ideas of Buddha and Confucius, and where the Emperor was worshipped as a divine being." The heresy of intimating that religious feeling lingers in China is then pointedly linked to the extremism of contemporaneous times. Tracking down a row of the many Buddha statues on display, the narrator intones, "An example of a personality cult from the former times." Given the images of Mao we have seen hanging on many interior walls and gazing down upon every key public space throughout the film, the comparison between personality cults and religious fervour is quite pointed, especially when the tracking shot ends with the face of a young Chinese man looking up at the statues.

Aside from the temple sequence, it occurred to me upon watching the film recently that a subtle auto-critique of all that Antonioni films is also built into the structure of *Chung kuo* itself – a reading I found alluded to in another recent article discovered as I finished writing this piece.(29) While much of the film conveys a sense of a foreign camera wandering the strange landscape of Maoist China, each of the film's three parts ends with a long performance, two of which are overtly theatrical in nature. At the end of part one, we see Beijing's Chang-an Theatre from the street, before a series of shots that show an audience filing in and taking their seats. The show is introduced by a female puppet, before the curtain parts to reveal a twelve-piece marionette orchestra. The camera pans across the human-like figures, quivering with happy, fixed expressions as they wait for the music to begin. A drum roll introduces the music and the puppets spring to life as they begin to "play". The performance lasts a little over three minutes, and contains several pans across the faces of the rigidly smiling, wide-eyed marionettes. The figures look uncannily life-like, yet strangely unreal with their lack of facial movement. As the music concludes, the curtain falls and the credits roll for the end of part one.

The marionette orchestra playing in the final sequence of part one of *Chung kuo, Cina.*

Near the end of *Chung kuo*'s second chapter, we enter a kindergarten in the southern city of Nanjing, where we see small children chanting a lesson. We then see them singing a range of tunes with their teacher, one of which is the song from the opening credits – *Wo ai Beijing Tiananmen*. Selected individuals or small groups perform various dances to accompany the songs at the centre of the circle of girls and boys. "From childhood, the basis for education is the thoughts and sayings by Mao," says the narrator, and many of the songs contain explicit references to the leader. Lastly, we see half a dozen little boys marching across the classroom, bearing fake spears and singing yet another revolutionary anthem.

From here the film cuts to an outdoor sports carnival at what appears to be a primary school. The event is a relay race, involving a dozen or so runners on each team. Beside the relay lanes, a crowd of students cheer their classmates in unison. The race ends, but the spectators begin chanting another slogan – "*Youyi diyi, bisai di'er*" ("friendship first, competition second") – although as with all the film's Chinese

dialogue, these words are not subtitled. Non-Mandarin speaking viewers simply hear the crowd chanting as one. While the children sloganeer, the camera slowly zooms over their heads to a portrait of Mao placed on a stage overlooking the scene, before we cut to the end credits.

Chung kuo's third and final part ends with a theatrical performance similar to the puppet show that concludes part one. This time the theatre is in Shanghai, and the performance takes up nearly 20 minutes of screen time – almost a third of the film's final chapter. Again, we first see a crowd assembling inside the theatre, beneath a slogan wishing the "Great Leader Chairman Mao 10,000 years of life." This time the performance is of an acrobatic nature, and over the next twenty minutes we witness some truly astonishing acts of skill, including pole climbing, tumbling, tightrope walking and plate spinning. Although the first group of performers comprises eight muscular men doing a rather awe-inspiring pole dance bearing rifles, none of the performances contains overtly ideological content. After this protracted sequence of pure spectacle, the performers all line up on stage to take the audience's round of applause. The camera tracks in mid-shot along the row of heavily made-up faces. There is a zoom to a closer mid-shot, and the camera pans back across the performers' faces in the opposite direction, just ahead of the closing curtain. Finally the lens meets a curtain coming the other way and we are left with the final image of a gently swaying piece of cloth, behind which the performers are now hidden from view.

The school scenes at the end of part two obviously illustrate some of the performative methods by which the regime attempted to inculcate collective values and subservience to Mao in children from a very young age. But what are we to make of the more theatrical sequences that bookend parts one and three, that seem so at odds with the everyday focus and wandering shooting style of the rest of the film? One way to read them is as understated commentaries on all we have seen previously. So much of life in Maoist China was overtly performative – from the theatre of the Red Guard mass rallies in 1966, to the small-scale, highly ritualised "speaking bitterness" sessions in which older Chinese recounted the horrors of pre-Communist life for younger listeners.(30) As the voiceover in *Chung kuo* acknowledges, the itineraries for foreigners visiting the country at the time were also standardised rituals encompassing certain sites –Tiananmen Square, the Ming Tombs, Shanghai's Bund and so on – and certain events, such as live caesarean operations performed using acupuncture rather than anaesthetic.(31) The caesarean that appears early in *Chung kuo* is one of the film's most arresting moments, unrelenting in its intrusive explicitness, utterly captivating in its combination of the horror of surgical incision and the wonder of new life busting into the world. Whatever the wisdom or ethics of this sequence's inclusion in the film, one can only shudder at the workings of a regime that regularly wheeled out pregnant women for slicing open and display before foreign guests in order to demonstrate the superiority of Chinese medicine. For all the operation's highly confronting "realness" – there's no forgetting the gurgle and surge of liquid as the poor woman's waters are broken – these caesareans without anaesthetic were also performances staged to impress outsiders, like much of what Antonioni and other visitors were shown. In this context, the concluding theatrical sequences at the end of parts one and three can be read as metaphors for Antonioni's entire experience in the People's Republic, observing a reality the regime carefully stage-managed for foreign eyes.

The puppet orchestra and acrobatic show offer a subtle comment through their evocation of a colourful, brilliant, dreamlike reality, with the painful labour and sacrifices required to construct these theatrical illusions carefully hidden from view. In the final moments of the film, the camera zooms in for a last caress of the acrobats' faces, so near to Antonioni and his crew, yet separated by a wall of political, economic and cultural forces. As the lens moves over the performers' features, the curtain cuts them off from view and Antonioni's three-week glance at the People's Republic is over. He has been offered a glimpse – a highly orchestrated glimpse, replete with performances both acknowledged and unacknowledged – but a glimpse nonetheless of a country at that time rarely seen by outsiders.

This final sequence summarises what, for me, is the essential honesty of Antonioni's representation of China in the context of Maoism and Cold War divisions. This honesty is why *Chung kuo* has stood the test of time as film art, while Ivens and Loridan's *Yukong* survives more as a curio and historical document. Antonioni sensed the essential unreality of what he was seeing – the utopian dream façade that the Maoist regime put so much time and effort into maintaining through a strictly policed culture and reign of political terror. *Chung kuo* remains a vital piece of filmmaking because it captures something of this dreamlike world, as well as those small moments of rupture that occur throughout the film. In the unexpected glimpses of the everyday Antonioni snatched while walking his prescribed path, and strange sequences such as that at the Buddhist Temple, we sense another reality playing out beneath the surface. Antonioni could not fully comprehend much of what he saw, but he understood that what he was seeing was only the outward appearance of things, and constructed his representation accordingly. Ivens and Loridan recorded Mao's carefully constructed façade as if it were the whole truth of life in the People's Republic, and consequently their film, I think, appears naïve when viewed today.

Beyond the explicit treatment of what each film portrays, *Chung kuo*'s speculative nature and gesturing towards that which lay outside the filmmaker's vision and understanding also renders it a far more open text than *Yukong*. *Chung kuo* is a film that provokes questions rather than purports to provide answers. And for all the ways in which my experience of Antonioni's film has shifted over time, and all the additional layers I now discern after my time spent in China, it is still, at heart, the documentary's open-ended, tantalising rendering of beautifully contingent moments of everyday life that holds me enthralled with each viewing. The sense of *being there*, before moments in time now past, is so powerful that a part of me still wants to enter that frame, to take a seat in that theatre, and hold my breath as the plate spinners weave their magic on a spring evening in Shanghai, 1972.

Endnotes

1. To cite one of the numerous narrational errors, during the film's Forbidden City sequence in part one, the narrator says the palace was described by Marco Polo in *Il Milione*. The Forbidden City was actually constructed during the Ming Dynasty in the fifteenth century, nearly 150 years after Polo claimed to have visited Beijing in 1266. The palace Polo described was that of the Mongolian Yuan Dynasty, which sat slightly to the northwest of where the Forbidden City now lies.

2. Alice Xiang details a range of reactions to the film posted online by contemporary Chinese viewers, including an anecdote about a woman who actually appears in the film seeing it for the first time in 2007. Alice Xiang, "'When Ordinary Seeing Fails': Reclaiming the Art of Documentary in Michelangelo Antonioni's 1972 China Film *Chung Kuo*," *Senses of Cinema* 67 (July 2013). http://sensesofcinema.com/2013/feature-articles/when-ordinary-seeing-fails-reclaiming-the-art-of-documentary-in-michelangelo-antonionis-

1972-china-film-chung-kuo/

3. Seymour Chatman, *Antonioni, or, the Surface of the World* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1985), p. 168.

4. Sun Hongyun, "Two Chinas? Joris Ivens' *Yukong* and Antonioni's *China*," *Studies in Documentary Film* 3:1 (2009), p. 46.

5. For a detailed account of Chinese foreign policy during the Cultural Revolution years, including the reengagement with Western governments in the early 1970s, see Anne-Marie Brady, "Red and Expert: China's 'Foreign Friends' in the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, 1966–1969" in Woei Lien Chong (ed.), *China's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution: Master Narratives and Post-Mao Counternarratives* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2002), pp. 93–137.

6. Ibid., pp. 100–103.

7. Xiang, "When Ordinary Seeing Fails."

8. Rey Chow, "China as Documentary: Some Basic Questions (inspired by Michelangelo Antonioni and Jia Zhangke)," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 17:1 (February 2014), p. 6.

9. Xiang, "When Ordinary Seeing Fails."

10. Sun, "Two Chinas?," p. 50.

11. Ibid., pp. 45–59.

12. Ibid., p. 49.

13. Ibid., p. 49.

14. The contemporary Chinese Government officially estimates a death toll between 750,000–1.5 million for the Cultural Revolution, but this is likely conservative. Philip P. Pan, *Out of Mao's Shadow: The Struggle for the Soul of a New China* (London: Picador, 2009), p. 84. The systematic carrying out of mass killings, or incidents of mass death due to civil disturbances, during this period is well established. See for example Yang Su, "Mass Killings in the Cultural Revolution: A Study of Three Provinces" in Joseph W. Esherick, Paul G. Pickowicz and Andrew G. Walder (eds.), *The Chinese Cultural Revolution as History* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2006), pp. 96–123.

15. For a detailed account of the persecution experienced by a member of Shanghai's former upper classes during the Cultural Revolution, see Nien Cheng (1986), *Life and Death in Shanghai* (London: Flamingo, 1995).

16. Wu Wenguang quoted in Sun, "Two Chinas?," p. 57.

17. Yingchi Chu details the workings of the "dogmatic mode" of Maoist documentaries in her monograph *Chinese Documentaries: From Dogma to Polyphony* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 53–87.

18. For details of how political imperatives influenced the workings and representations of Chinese cinema during the Maoist years, see Chris Berry, *Postsocialist Cinema in Post-Mao China: The Cultural Revolution After the Cultural Revolution* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), p. 78.

19. Xiang, "When Ordinary Seeing Fails."

20. For a recent account of the campaign against Antonioni's film by a foreign eyewitness, see Isabel Hinton, "Struggling with Antonioni," *ChinaFile*, 24 October 2012, www.chinafile.com/struggling-antonioni

21. Anonymous *Renmin Ribao* [*People's Daily*] commentator, *A Vicious Motive, Despicable Tricks: A Critique of M. Antonioni's Anti-China Film China* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1974).

22. Ibid., p. 1.

23. Ibid.

24. Umberto Eco, "De interpretatione, or the Difficulty of Being Marco Polo (On the occasion of Antonioni's China film)", trans. Christine Leefeldt, *Film Quarterly* 30:4 (special book issue) (Summer 1977), p. 9.

25. Chow, "China as Documentary," pp. 1–2.

26. For a detailed discussion of the origins of the campaign against Confucius in the power struggles playing out in Beijing in the early to mid-1970s, see Keith Forster, "The Politics of Destabilization and Confrontation: the Campaign Against Lin Biao and Confucius in Zhejiang Province, 1974," *China Quarterly* 107 (Sept 1986), pp. 433–662.

27. Xiang, "When Ordinary Seeing Fails."

28. Eco, "De interpretatione," pp. 9–11.

29. Jiwei Xiao, "A Traveller's Glance: Antonioni in China," *New Left Review* 79 (Jan-Feb 2013), p. 110

30. Ann Anagnost cites a first-hand description published in 1970 of the way one peasant was taken through 24 sessions with cadres before a "speaking bitterness" session, in order to rework his memories into a narrative appropriate to the Chinese Communist Party's vision of

history, in *National Past-Times: Narrative, Representation, and Power in Modern China* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997), p. 32.

31. Canadian Jan Wong, for example, also recounts witnessing a caesarean performed using acupuncture while touring China as a young Maoist in 1972, in her memoir *Red China Blues: My Long March from Mao to Now* (New York: Anchor Books, 1997), pp. 37–8. For more on the different types of foreigners who visited or lived in China during the Maoist period, and the varying restrictions on their activities and movements, see Brady, "Red and Expert," p. 98.

SHARE ON:

Michelangelo Antonioni: The Truth about *The Passenger*

Hard Clarity, Vaporous Ambiguity: The Fusion of Realism and Modernism in Antonioni's early 1960s Films [1]

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dan
Edwards

Dan Edwards is a fellow at the Research Unit in Public Cultures at Melbourne University. His debut monograph, *Independent Chinese Documentary: Alternative Visions, Alternative Publics*, was published by Edinburgh University Press in 2015. He lived and worked in China as a magazine journalist from 2007–11, and before that worked at the Australian Film Commission. He was awarded a PhD in Film and Television from Monash University in 2014.

RELATED POSTS

READ THE SENSES OF CINEMA WORLD POLL 2019

World Poll

INTRODUCTION

PART 1

PART 2

PART 3

PART 4

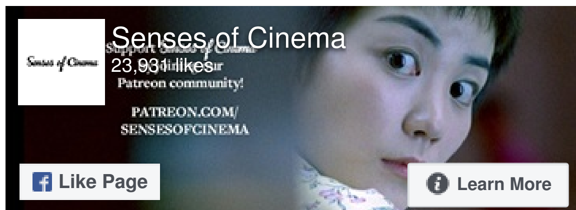
PART 5

PART 6

PART 7

PART 8

JOIN US



Senses of Cinema

Founded in 1999, Senses of Cinema is one of the first online film journals of its kind and has set the standard for professional, high quality film-related content on the Internet.

© Senses of Cinema 2019

STAFF MEMBERS

Editors:

Michelle Carey • Daniel Fairfax • Fiona Villella • César Albarrán-Torres

CONTRIBUTING PARTNER

DONATE TO SENSES

Click here to make a donation. If you are an Australian resident, any donations over $2 are tax deductible.

Antonioni's three English-language films come after this, and here is where I part company from many pundits. Blow-Up (1966) is the swinging-London tale of a fashion photographer, played by David Hemmings, who accidentally takes a photo of a murder in a London park, and only realises it when he begins to enlarge the background in grainy detail. His Chung Kuo – China (1972) is a punishingly long, three-and-a-half-hour documentary about that country which often looks like nothing more than a rather naive travelogue-cum-home-movie. But there is real archival interest there. In true Antonioni fashion, we get to see luxurious shots of vast landscapes in the country as they make way to the rural areas, such as the Honan Province and the Yellow River, in a balance with city landscape shots in Shanghai and Suzhou. It's this fine balance of the rural and the urban, of Chinese people living and working in both contexts in the country, that I thought makes this documentary quite a winner.