

AFTERWORD

Notes on *Rereading* and Re-enacting “China”

Giovanni Tarantino

In Europe, the historical representation and narration of China and the Orient more in general from an outsider’s point of view has conjured up an exotic and a-historical image of a poetical, mystical and refined civilization. In Walpole’s Britain, for example, “the argument from the Chinese”—namely, the admiration for a prosperous and densely populated kingdom which did not belong to a single faith—was frequently used in religious disputes when claiming a wider or more coherent policy of tolerance or seeking to cut down the prerogatives of the Anglican hierarchy. Moreover, the opposition press commonly brandished it in the bitter criticisms aimed at government policies. The most prolific journalists, tirelessly dedicated to revealing the corruptive tendencies, illicit ties with bishops and authoritarian inclination of the Walpole administration, and anxious to recement the cornerstones of British constitutionalism, repeatedly singled out the Chinese administrative system as exemplary. Their articles increasingly came to be dotted with snappy Chinese anecdotes of a moralistic sort (Tarantino 2012, 49–53). Nevertheless, the political and cultural paths followed in the actual western-Chinese power relations were rather more prosaic: from the proselytizing aspirations of the Christian missionaries, to the inconclusive plans for European colonial domination, through ineffective eighteenth-century diplomatic missions, conflicting Sinophile and then increasingly Sinophobe views in a large part of enlightened reflection on the ideal constitutional alchemies, different options of interfaith coexistence, and inclinations towards sec-

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ularization. The change processes in China producing “the hundred years of national humiliation” were principally the response to the inexorable affirmation of unequal global trade and China’s financial subjugation to Europe. To a certain degree these same processes were anticipated, championed or even “prescribed” in the works of Adam Smith and Denis Diderot (Abbattista 2022).

Between the end of the 1920s and the start of the 1930s, political changes in Asia and Europe persuaded the Italian government that it could assume an important role in the game of relations with China. Therefore, the Fascist regime drew up an ideological narrative which was supposed to legitimize and corroborate the idea that it could claim and exercise a role at the helm of Sino-European relations. “May Italy, that was the first with Marco Polo and Matteo Ricci, not become the last, among European nations, to feel the duty to know and help China”, claimed mathematician-cum-Chinese language teacher Giovanni Vacca (1872–1953) in 1934 (as quoted in De Giorgi 2010, 582). Indeed, Italy hoped that it could draw advantage from the difficulties encountered by the much more experienced European players in that area, first of all Great Britain, owing to the emergence of anti-imperialist and nationalist movements in China on one hand and Japanese expansionist goals on the other. Nevertheless, the idea of a privileged relationship with China and the hope of increasing Italian influence in East Asia clashed with Italy’s objective structural weakness in that area and the need to support Japan’s imperial sights. In the second half of the 1930s, the war of resistance against the Japanese aggressor was spun as the surrender of nationalist China to Bolshevism and Russian influence. Chiang Kai-shek, long celebrated for saving the Nationalist Party from communism, was now instead blamed for unexpectedly countering Japanese imperial expansion (De Giorgi 2010, 584).

Decades later, during the Cultural Revolution, famous Italian director Michelangelo Antonioni (1912–2007)—whose off-camera leftist political views were no secret—was invited by the Chinese government to document the New China. In 1972, for six months, Antonioni and his crew travelled from north to south, east to west of the great Asian country. After three weeks of filming, Antonioni edited the videos into a three-and-a-half-hour documentary entitled *Chung Kuo/China*. The documentary started in Tiananmen Square, “the great silent space that is the centre of the world for the Chinese” (“Chung Kuo” means middle kingdom). Antonioni concentrates on some cultural aspects that he deemed most representative of this millennial civilization: acupuncture techniques, cotton factory workers at work, the immense and pointless monumentality of the Great Wall, the Ming dynasty tombs, peasants’ hard graft, culinary specialities. The camera dwelt at length on the imperial palace described by Marco Polo:

One Sunday we went to see the walls, stairs, roofs and gardens of the forbidden city described in *The Travels*. Until a few decades ago, no European and very few Chinese could enter these places. Closed during the Cultural Revolution,

the City of Emperors has only recently reopened. Our reason for coming was more to see the Chinese that visit it than to look for the memories of extinct dynasties. The rooms and pavilions have names that celebrate the religious and civil grandeur against which the emperors judged themselves: Supreme Harmony, Celestial Purity, Terrestrial Serenity, Nourishment of the Spirit. The real story that took place inside these bastions is very different. They were cruel and greedy courts, dominated by customs that were as sumptuous as they were inhuman. The rooms and palaces were itineraries towards an inaccessible power. [...] Today the Chinese have a serene relationship with their past. They only feel its greatness as a reflection on the present and their visits to this no longer forbidden city are unhurried and laidback (Antonioni 1972).

The itinerary continued southwards from Beijing into the Henan province, China's breadbasket. The first passage from cooperatives to the farming communes took place in 1958. The director takes his time to show the austere everyday life inside a commune. The story continues by introducing the spectator to the Blue River valley and the hustle and bustle of lives along the precious and vulnerable network of rivers and canals. Antonioni then shows the wonders of the Garden of Harmony and the Buddhist temple in Suzhou:

Of course, Suzhou reminded us of Venice. [...] When Marco Polo got here, he was struck by the level of civilization of its inhabitants, who already used paper money, wove brocade, cultivated the arts and medicine, and had 6,000 stone bridges that were so high that a galley or even two galleys together could sail under each one. Today, it is a city of trade, factories and human industry (Antonioni 1972).

Lastly, the journey took Antonioni to Shanghai, the second-largest city in the world, with ten million inhabitants. The Huangpu River, with its constant traffic of large cargo ships, makes the city that has changed face over a generation a nerve centre for the country. His camera first dwells on the mud and straw huts which millions of people had lived in, then the elegant pavilion of the tea room reserved for state pensioners, and lastly the immense industrial outskirts whose products end up all over China.

In 1974, to Antonioni's dismay, the Chinese government banned projections of the film and targeted the director with an intense campaign of criticism and hostility:

Antonioni came to China as our guest in spring 1972. With his camera, he visited Beijing, Shanghai, Nanjing, Suzhou and Linxian. And yet the purpose of this journey to China was not to improve knowledge of China and even less so to promote friendship between the Chinese and Italian peoples. On the contrary, hostile towards the Chinese people, he used the opportunity of his visit for ulterior purposes; by underhand and utterly despicable means he hunted specifically for material that could be used to slander and attack China. *Renmin Ribao* 人民日報 (The People's Daily), 30 January 1974 (as quoted in Rai Cultura n.d.)

One of the reasons for that acrimony towards Antonioni were the raw relations between China and the Soviet Union. While Antonioni was filming his documentary in China, the Soviet Union was projecting a film produced in 1971 by its Central Studio for Documentary Film entitled *Night over China – the Grandeur and Folly of China’s Fallen Revolution*, which put together clips filmed before the Sino-Soviet split. After the release of *Chung Kuo*, the Soviet Union did not hesitate to extrapolate some episodes of the Italian documentary, *rereading* them and craftily bending them to its own disparaging narrative of Mao Zedong. This affront was obviously unacceptable to the hawks in the Chinese government and in particular the Gang of Four, a political partnership formed by the wife of Mao Jiang Qing, vice-chairman of the Communist Party Wang Hongwen and the boldest advocates of the revolutionary propaganda, Zhang Chunqiao and Yao Wenyuan. They saw every criticism against Mao as a threat to their own legitimation. Hence, to undermine the credibility of Russia’s anti-Chinese propaganda (but also to discredit the premier of the State Council, Zhou Enlai, Jiang’s main political opponent and feared contender for his succession, who had championed a rapprochement between China and the West), they immediately set about condemning Antonioni and his film. Knowing little about the political divergences between China and Russia, Antonioni openly expressed his disapproval and surprise at being insultingly singled out by the Chinese state media as hired by the “Russian revisionists”. In his essay “De Interpretatione, or the Difficulty of Being Marco Polo”, published towards the end of the 1970s, Umberto Eco finely summed up Antonioni’s despondency: “The anti-Fascist artist who went to China inspired by affection and respect and who found himself accused of being a Fascist, a reactionary in the pay of Soviet revisionism and American imperialism, hated by 800 million persons” (Eco and Leefeldt 1977, 9).

In the 1960s and 70s, a large number of western left-wing intellectuals (think of Althusser in France or Dutschke in Germany) had been swept away by a wave of sympathy for Red China as they looked upon the country (more imaginary than real) as a feasible alternative to western capitalism. They may have pointed at China, but in reality, they were criticizing their own political contexts. Once again, “the argument from the Chinese” was used “as an agency for the West’s self-criticism and self-renewal in moral and political spheres” (Liu 2014, 26). The relationship between China and the Italian intellectuals was very much the same. Even before official bilateral relations were established between Italy and the People’s Republic of China, delegations of Italian left-wing intellectuals had already visited China, several of those taking part in these discovery expeditions, including Franco Fortini and Carlo Cassola, entrusting their impressions to popular travel reports. Their treatment of the otherness of China and the Chinese in their travel notes did not set out to underline any Italian superiority—if anything, their aim was to urge Italy to reboot its institutions and their ethical and conceptual foundations. Curzio Malaparte, who briefly visited China in 1956 on behalf of the Italian Communist Party and celebrated its revolutionary verve in his journal *Io in Russia e in Cina* published after his death

in 1958, even left his villa in Capri to the People's Republic of China in his will, in the hope that it would become a study centre for Chinese intellectuals. Director Carlo Lizzani's documentary *La Muraglia Cinese/Behind the Great Wall*, brought out in 1959 (the only colour film footage showing China to the West), represented China as an extraordinary political laboratory, whose people were marching towards a radiant future. With these premises, it is easy to imagine the Chinese government's hopes for Antonioni's *Chung Kuo*. Contrary to all expectations, however, the Italian director showed little interest in the country's industrial modernization and social transformations, instead demonstrating a preference for "unfruitful lands, lonely old people, tired animals and ugly houses":

His three-and-half-hour-long film does not at all reflect the new things, new spirit and new face of our great motherland, but puts together many viciously distorted scenes and shots to attack Chinese leaders, smear socialist New China, slander China's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution and insult the Chinese people. There is no doubt that any Chinese citizen with any pride in their nation will be furious when they watch this film. *Renmin Ribao* 人民日報 (The People's Daily), 30 January 1974 (as quoted in Rai Cultura n.d.)

Such heartfelt criticism was the upshot of China's distorted perception of the modernization it had achieved and the frustration for its lack of recognition abroad. A deep-rooted westernizing tendency fuelled a dual paranoia. On one hand, the Chinese population deemed its nation a lot more important than it really was. On the other hand, aware of the gap between China and the West, some Chinese notables reacted with overblown irritation when western observers noted or revealed ongoing structural shortcomings or contradictions or rigidity in the nerve centre of associative life in New China (Liu 2014, 28).

Eco observed how the image of pigs accompanied by a snatch of music from the Beijing Opera House could quite rightly be offensive and arouse in Chinese spectators "the same reaction that a bishop might experience seeing a clinch accompanied by the hymn *Tantum Ergo*" (Eco and Lefeldt 1997, 11). Nevertheless, the Chinese authorities' irritation was not, or at least not only, sparked by noticing an aesthetic slip or lack of sensitivity. The background music, as Xin Liu clarifies, was not merely an excerpt from a traditional Beijing Opera. It was a famous aria taken from the *Ode of the Dragon River*, a so-called "revolutionary opera" composed during the Cultural Revolution by Jiang Qing, convinced advocate of the need to innovate the theatrical arts and reject the plots of traditional Beijing Opera as feudal and bourgeois. Hence, the latter were banned and replaced by revolutionary operas celebrating the fight against class enemies and foreigners and praising Mao's thought. In all likelihood the Gang of Four would have condemned Antonioni even if he had not made use of these irrelevant combinations of images and music; however, their clumsy, albeit perhaps unintentional, presence irremediably irked people (Liu 2014, 30–1).

Two years after the end of the Cultural Revolution, at the Central Working Conference on 10 November 1978, vice-chairman of the Chinese Communist Party Li Xiannian went back to the controversy aroused by Antonioni's docu-

mentary, demonstrating a new awareness and political sensitivity: “There are some problems in *Chung Kuo*. It hurt the feeling of Chinese people. However, the Gang of Four used the film to attack Premier Zhou. This issue must be well investigated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs” (Yu 2009, 87). Upon his urging, a government investigation invalidated a large part of the objections made against the film *Chung Kuo* but it did not lift the ban. Most Chinese citizens therefore had to wait until 2004, when the ban was lifted and the documentary projected for the first time at the Beijing Film Academy, to finally see *Chung Kuo* with their own eyes. This is how Geoffrey York, journalist with the *Globe and Mail*, described the spectators’ reactions:

For the audience in Beijing, the film was a journey to a land long ago and far away, as alien as any distant galaxy. Most of the audience members were young people who knew little of the Cultural Revolution beyond the stories they might have heard from their parents. [...] Many of the Chinese audience members could not help laughing at the Maoist songs and revolutionary posters that the film captured. They giggled when an elderly woman explained that she had few grandchildren because ‘to build a socialist society, small families are better’. They chuckled at the scenes of kindergarten children marching like Chinese soldiers, singing songs of praise to the People’s Liberation Army (York 2004, as quoted in Liu 2014, 31).

The first public projection of *Chung Kuo* also met with criticism from some Chinese intellectuals. Ren Yuan, renowned film critic and lecturer in communication studies at the University of China, expressed unease and disappointment before some scenes which he felt inappropriate, such as those portraying children with runny noses or other people filmed on their way to the toilet. Antonioni’s realist film style, used to dealing with European standards of beauty and ugliness, here came face to face with a Chinese aesthetic sensitivity conditioned by the eminently Confucian prescription that “moral and aesthetic goodness [be seen and experienced] as intertwined” (Liu 2014, 32).

Antonioni’s film could therefore be read and *reread* in many ways. It at once photographed and aroused different gazes: those of the people portrayed, not rarely in funny and proud poses, but often also exposed, unknowing, in the melancholy austerity of their impoverished situation; that of the Chinese spectators—who discovered their regret, after the ban was lifted, for having supported the regime’s ostracism—perhaps perturbed but nevertheless grateful for a non-toned-down representation of their history; and that of the European public, at first curious about a non-Soviet socialism, then dismayed upon seeing the generalized poverty, the workers’ indoctrination, the children’s military marches.

In his essay, Xin Liu points out how one of the most recent and significant Chinese artistic *rereadings* of *Chung Kuo*, the dance theatre *DIS/ORIENTED: Antonioni in China* (2013), was brought to the stage by choreographer Yin Mei, significantly one of those great many young people who in 1974 took part in the protest movement against Antonioni’s documentary without having seen it. Years later, when she finally had the chance to see it, Yin Mei was bowled over

by Antonioni's realistic method and above all by the difference between the director's gaze on China then and her memories of the same years. So, she came up with a choreography portraying an imaginary conversation between her and the director, juxtaposed with frames from the original documentary and incursions onto the stage by the performers, alongside a narrator's voice breaking up the fragments of tales from the film with excerpts from Yin's childhood diary. The performance is made up of three acts marked by dull clangs and the propaganda music that resounded in *Chung Kuo*. The three parts all began with Yin and a partner dancing the same pas de deux. At the end of the performance, the clangs stopped and Yin pushed the dancer away from herself and the stage. After years of coercion, the sudden awareness of an unknown freedom catches her out and throws her off-kilter.

A few months after the Chinese government placed its ban on Antonioni's film, the comedy by Jean Yanne *Les Chinois à Paris* (1974) came out in French cinemas, prompting a vehement official protest from China. The film opens with the French president's (Bernard Blier) announcement that the French borders have been invaded by Chinese troops. He solemnly announces his commitment to defend France, and runs off to catch a plane for New York. Imagining the People's Liberation Army invading and occupying Paris, *Les Chinois à Paris* is a parody both of France during the German occupation and the French infatuation with Maoist China—the "wind from the east" which swept through France in the 1970s. As Catherine E. Clark recently observed, "replaying the history of World War II with the Chinese in place of the Nazis suggests that the Maoist Far Left might be closer to the Far Right than many French people thought at the time" (Clark 2019, 71).

A particularly important insertion in the film and the *rereading* is a dance, *Carmeng*. As the title immediately shows, it is a "Mao-ified" version of Bizet's *Carmen* (1875), watched by a public of Chinese officials and French collaborators. *Carmeng* is an enemy of the revolution and an incurable seducer. In love with her, Don Cho-Sey, a soldier in the People's Liberation Army, frees her and is put to trial by court martial. But now seeing her dancing seductively among the American soldiers, Don Cho-Sey realizes that she has forgotten about him and he sees the light. He alerts his battalion so that they, together with a commando of warmongering women, surprise and defeat the capitalists, and he kills *Carmeng* himself. As already noted for Antonioni's film, the dance is not just a farcical imitation of *Carmen*, but a clever parody of a ballet also stemming from Mao's wife's cultural policy. Recent studies (Clark 2019; Ma 2020) have identified the target of the parody as *The Red Detachment of Women*—telling the tale of a female-only battalion engaged in the struggle against the Nationalists—one of the 18 "model works" celebrating the Cultural Revolution (ballets, operas, piano scores) produced under the watchful directorship of Jiang Qing. So Yanne's film at once reproduced and ridiculed what the Chinese were doing. Even more sig-

nificantly, almost all of the characters in the film seem to be inept, blind followers of ideologies, and the mocking of Maoism seems to be aimed at communism and socialism in general. “The People’s Republic of China”, notes Clark, “was hardly a blank screen onto which the French projected their fantasies about the ‘East,’ but rather a nation whose politicians were also very adept at reimagining France in their own image” (quite revealingly, one of the provisional hymns of the People’s Republic of China, composed in the 1920s, copied the rhythm of *Frère Jacques*). And if China’s vigorous protest once again used an international stage to dampen internal conflicts and cement positions of power, in France just buying a ticket to watch *Les Chinois à Paris* implied sharing an irreverent and distinctly anti-utopian political perspective (Clark 2019, 72–4).

In 1739, a pantomime called the *Ballet des Porcelaines* (also known as *The Teapot Prince*) was put on at the castle of Morville near Paris. It was staged a second time in the castle garden in 1741, before disappearing without trace. All that remains of that 15-minute-long comedy is a musical score (composed by Nicolas Racot de Grandval) and the libretto written by the Comte de Caylus (1692–1765), both of which are conserved in the French National Library in Paris. The libretto tells the story of a Chinese magician on a remote island who transforms the islanders and passers-by into porcelain with a touch of his wand. A prince who hunts all over the island in search of his loved-one also falls victim to the spell. It will be the princess who saves him and the other prisoners by taking the wand from the evil wizard and transforming him into a “*pagode*”, an eighteenth-century racialized version of a porcelain bobblehead, one of those ornamental pottery figurines depicting a Chinese man with grotesque features, a bobbing head and removable limbs. The story shows the Europeans’ infatuation with Chinese porcelain and their hope to understand and reproduce their production techniques (think, for example, of the eighteenth-century Queen of Naples, Maria Amalia of Saxony, and her porcelain boudoir, a masterpiece in pottery technique and artistry made in just under 20 years by the Royal Porcelain Factory of Capodimonte) also in order to forge a modern sense of kingship with international scope (Frothingham 1955; Zanardi 2018).

As Meredith Martin, associate professor of art history at New York University, notes,

[...] the château’s owner served as France’s foreign minister and promoted trade with Asia. We can assume some kind of chinoiserie imagery and context for the ballet, which can be interpreted both as a standard fairy tale love story and as an allegory for the intense European desire to know and steal the secrets of porcelain manufacture (Martin 2022).

Having learnt about the libretto from Esther Bell, a curator at the Clark Art Institute who had found it in the Paris library, Martin set her mind on bringing it back to life and to the stage in a *rereading* that would speak to a contemporary

audience. Her chance came during her 2021 fellowship at NYU's Center for Ballet and the Arts thanks to the interest shown in her project by Phil Chan, choreographer and co-founder of Final Bow for Yellowface, an organization whose purpose is to rid ballet of racist, stereotypical and disparaging representations of Asians. In the "re-imagined" version of the *Ballet des Porcelaines*, already performed several times in America and due to hit the stage shortly in Europe too (including Naples and Venice), Chan and Martin have replaced the racialized character of the Chinese wizard with a European porcelain collector inspired by the figure of Augustus the Strong (1670–1733)—known as Frederick August I as duke and prince-elector of Saxony, and August II as king of Poland—who collected over 29,000 porcelain objects (Martin 2022).

With nothing more than the libretto and a musical score, no stage sets, or sketches to suggest the costumes, there can be no accusing the two ingenious rereaders who have rebuilt the *Ballet des Porcelaines* of betraying or ignoring its historicity or giving into the increasing calls from American society to implement the so-called "cancel culture" every time that minority rights, including the fundamental right to a respectful representation, are trampled upon. In the face of a long history of mystifying and tendentious rereadings generally aimed at assimilation and domination, this is instead—suffice it to look at the fine Chinese porcelain evoked in the stage costumes and not least the porcelain tights that imprisons the evil wizard at the end—a story of restitution, reparation and beauty.

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