When Taylorism Met Revolutionary Romanticism: Documentary Cinema in China's Great Leap Forward

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In 1959, at the height of the Great Leap Forward campaign, the Central Newsreel and Documentary Film Factory (CNDFF) in Beijing released a short documentary entitled *An Inch of Time Is Worth an Inch of Gold* (*Yicun guangyin yicun jin*, 一寸光陰一寸金).[1] Taking as its title an old saying on the value of time, the film itself was an exemplary piece of time management, packing its ten-minute length with a potent audio-visual rhetoric to emphasize the importance of time to the ten-year-young People's Republic of China (PRC). The film began with a black screen and a persistent tick-tock of a clock in the soundtrack. Tick-tock, tick-tock, the invisible clock worked tirelessly, compelling the audience to experience the unstoppable lapse of time.

Time was of crucial importance to the new PRC, for the Communist Revolution that had brought it into existence had also thrown it into a temporal conundrum. While classical Marxist theory had outlined a relatively clear temporal progression for stages of social transformation, and predicted the realization of socialism through a worldwide proletarian revolution initiated in the most advanced economies, such a revolution had failed to occur. Instead, capitalism broke at its weakest link in Russia and China, leaving these countries in an unprecedented situation. Politically they adopted what they considered to be socialist policies and regarded themselves as

Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

1. For all subsequent quotations from the film, see *An Inch of Time Is Worth an Inch of Gold*, dir. Chen Guangzhong (陳光忠) (1959).

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the vanguard societies to lead the world to communism. Yet economically, they lagged far behind advanced capitalist countries. This temporal schism—between political aspiration and developmental stage—meant vulnerability for the PRC in a Cold War environment. The Great Leap Forward was a bold experiment intended to defy the determinism of conventional developmental time; through it New China was meant to rapidly industrialize and close the rift between its development stage and political aspiration.

A time-based industrial art, cinema became the leading means of inculcating a complex temporal aesthetic during this period. Documentary cinema, as the mode of cinema that experienced the greatest growth, was particularly important to the construction of this aesthetic. Combining Taylorism with revolutionary romanticism, documentaries inculcated time discipline and trained workers to heed and transcend clock time with revolutionary will and technical innovation. Rapidly made and delivered by mobile projectionists to sites of mass labor all over the country, documentaries showcased experimental vernacular technology, organized mass production campaigns, and powered production, sometimes literally, with its electrifying energy.

This essay traces the deep entanglement between cinema and material productions in industry, agriculture, and infrastructure and uses it as a prism to investigate the intertwined histories of media practice and social transformation. What was the Chinese revolution? How do we account for its failures, especially ones as massive and tragic as the Great Leap Forward, which ended in early 1961 amidst economic collapse and wide-spread famine? Treating the Chinese revolution and the postrevolution constructions as radical experiments with no adequate blueprints, I argue for the critical role of media in delimiting the epistemological, political, and aesthetic possibilities that shaped the particular paths in which these massive experiments were actualized.

Time, Revolution, and the Great Leap Forward in Cinema

In the fall of 1949, after witnessing the founding of the People's Republic in Tiananmen Square, the writer Hu Feng (胡風) expressed his exhilaration in a poem published in the *People's Daily*, entitled "Time Has Begun." Hu

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described the PRC's founding as a radical reconfiguration of temporality, where time "leapt to its feet" to answer Mao Zedong's command, "March Forward!"[2]

A sense of a new era dawning had often accompanied revolutions in modern times. Hannah Arendt in her study of the French and American revolutions described the modern conception of revolution as both a historical and historiographical act, bound up "with the notion that the course of history suddenly begins anew, that an entirely new story, a story never known or told before, is about to unfold."[3] In the case of the Chinese communist revolution, a radical transformation of time was not only an aspiration but also a perceived necessity; rapid industrialization seemed to be the only path to survival in a Cold War environment. Yet could time truly leap to its feet and begin a bold forward march, when severe material limitations threatened to bind the country's pace of progress to the conventional time of sequential development, that tick-tock of clock time one hears at the beginning of *Inch of Time*?

With the tick-tock continuing its rhythmic assault on the audience, *Inch of Time*'s first sequence appears on the screen: a montage of different kinds of clocks, including a wooden pendulum clock, a metal wall clock, an alarm clock, and a young woman looking at a wristwatch (fig. 1). A female voice-over speaks: "Time always moves at sixty minutes an hour, twenty-four hours a day." Time seems to a large degree ungovernable by political visions. It has an autonomous logic and pace of its own.

The tension between the revolutionary aspiration to remake time and the rationality and autonomy of modern time underlaid China's Great Leap Forward, a mass campaign to speed up industrialization. After prolonged warfare China had been one of the poorest countries in the world when the Communist Party assumed power in 1949, with its 1950 GDP per capita only one-fourth that of the United Kingdom in the 1820s.[4] Despite this, Mao Zedong announced in November 1957 that it would take China only fifteen years to catch up with Great Britain in steel production. Mao's optimistic prediction was partly based on good economic performance during China's first five-year plan. More importantly, it came from his belief in the power of mind over matter and in the organizational advantages gained

2. Hu Feng (胡風), "Shijian kaishi le" (時間開始了, Time Has Begun), *People's Daily*, 20 Nov. 1949, p. 7.

3. Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York, 2006), pp. 18–19.

4. See Kimberley Ens Manning and Felix Wemheuer, introduction to *Eating Bitterness: New Perspectives on China's Great Leap Forward and Famine*, ed. Manning and Wemheuer (Vancouver, 2011), p. 3.

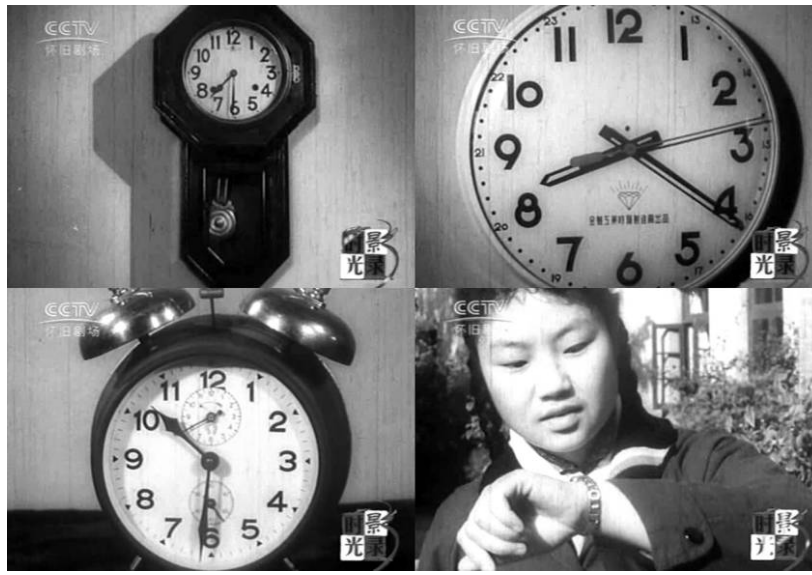

FIGURE 1. A montage of clocks and wristwatch in the beginning sequence of *An Inch of Time Is Worth an Inch of Gold* (1959).

through China's socialist transformation, which had been consolidated by then.[5]

Initiated in the fall of 1957, the Great Leap Forward plunged the nation into a production spree, with news of extraordinary productivity gains in agriculture and industry reported across the country. A Great Leap Forward in cinema was launched concurrently, which aimed to rival the US film industry in output in ten years.[6] The number of film studios increased from six in 1957 to thirty-four in 1960.[7] Exhibition venues and mobile projection units increased from 648 in 1949, 9,965 in 1957, to more than 15,000 at the end of 1959.[8] Projectionists brought cinema beyond urban centers; by 1959, more

5. For the economic rationale of the Great Leap Forward, see Maurice Meisner, *Mao's China and After: A History of the People's Republic* (New York, 1999), pp. 204–14. On Mao's voluntarist beliefs, see Richard D. Baum, "'Red and Expert': The Politico-Ideological Foundations of China's Great Leap Forward," *Asian Survey* 4 (Sept. 1964): 1048–57.

6. See Lin Shaoxiong (林少雄) and Chen Jianfeng (陳劍鋒), *Yishixingtai de xingxiang zhanshi: jishi yingpian fazhan yu zhizhengdang de wenhua celue* (意識形態的形象展示：紀實影片發展與執政黨的文化策略, The Visual Manifestation of Ideology: Development of Documentary Cinema and Cultural Strategies of the Ruling Party) (Shanghai, 2009), p. 218.

7. See Huang Mei (荒煤), "Xin Zhongguo dianying shiye de xunsu fazhan" (新中國電影世界的迅速發展, The Rapid Development of New China's Cinematic Enterprise), *People's Daily*, 30 Oct. 1959, p. 7. After 1962, a large number of provincial level film studios closed down; see Shan Wanli (單萬里), *Zhongguo jilu dianying shi* (中國紀錄電影史, History of Chinese Documentary Cinema) (Beijing, 2005), p. 191.

8. See Chris Berry, *Postsocialist Cinema in Post-Mao China: The Cultural Revolution after the Cultural Revolution* (New York, 2004), p. 32.

than three-fourths of exhibitions were located in factories, mining camps, army bases, and in the countryside.[9]

Documentary film was the mode of cinema that experienced the greatest growth during this period. In 1958–1959, the total quantity of documentary and newsreel films produced was 1,717 reels, exceeding the entire volume of 1,306 reels produced in the nine years between 1949 and 1957. 1,228 reels were made in the single year of 1960.[10] There were many reasons for the increase. First, newly established provincial-level studios often lacked trained filmmakers and well-equipped studio space to make fiction films. Out of thirty-four film studios in operation in 1960, only twelve had the capacity to make fictional films.[11] Documentaries were much easier to make. Shot on location, documentaries didn't require elaborate studios. Documentary filmmakers were also more readily available in the provinces. By the mid-1950s, the CNDFF in Beijing had already trained a large number of newsreel filmmakers and built a nationwide network of newsreel production. Film journalists sent by the CNDFF had been stationed in the provinces and regularly provided newsreel footage to Beijing. This network of filmmakers merged into newly established provincial studios to help production, leading to a flourishing of documentary filmmaking.[12] Second, political campaigns such as the "Anti-Rightist" Campaign in 1957 and "Pull Down the White Flags, Put Up the Red Flags" Campaign in 1958, made it challenging to write politically safe scripts for feature films.[13] Documentary, involving the participation of proletarians who represented themselves on the screen, became a safer option. The most important reason, as I will elaborate in the rest of the essay, is that the documentary responded most speedily and effectively to production needs of the time; it became a productive force driving the production campaigns in industry, agriculture, and infrastructure.

Faster than the Clock: Inculcating a Socialist Modern Time

Cinema, as a time-based medium, has been crucial in shaping the modern sense of time, writes Mary Ann Doane. By studying early cinema's

9. See Huang Mei, "Xin Zhongguo dianying shiye de xunsu fazhan," p. 7.

10. See Shan Wanli, *Zhongguo jilu dianying shi*, p. 179.

11. See ibid., p. 178. Also see Ding Jiao (丁嶠), "Xinwen jilu dianying yongyuan zuo shidai de jianbing" (新聞紀錄電影永遠做時代的尖兵, News Films Are Always Vanguards of the Times), *People's Daily*, 24 Aug. 1960, p. 7.

12. See Yang Jinyong (楊金勇), "Cong jianli sheying qudui dao sheying jizhezhan de licheng" (從建立攝影區隊到攝影記者站的歷程, The Journey from Setting Up District Teams for Cinematography to Founding Correspondents' Stations], in *Women de zuji* (我們的足跡, Our Footprints), ed. Zhang Jianzhen (張建珍), Zhang Mengqi (張孟起), and Guan Mingguo (關明國), 2 vols. (Beijing, 2003), 1:68–70.

13. Shan Wanli, *Zhongguo jilu dianying shi*, p. 181.

participation in the structuring of time and contingency in capitalist modernity, Doane argues that the moving image as a technology was central to the formation of modern ideas about continuity versus discontinuity, contingency versus determinism, temporal irreversibility versus archivability. It was through cinema and other kinetic experiences of urban modernity that time gained modern representability and became palpable to the human senses.[14]

In the PRC's first decade, cinema was among the most important means of inculcating an industrial modern time. *Inch of Time*, for example, begins with images of clock time and unit productivity. "Everyone knows the old saying, 'an inch of time is worth an inch of gold,' but do we really understand the value of each minute and second?" the voice-over asks. A fast-paced montage sequence follows: a postal worker stamping postmarks and sorting letters, a typist working on a typewriter, a chef making dumplings (fig. 2a). The shots alternate between the adroit hands in close-up and the worker framed in a frontal medium shot. The voice-over calculates aloud: "The letter-sorter can sort two letters per second, more than a hundred letters per minute, and more than seven thousand letters per hour."

Such images of rationalized production share common features with Taylorist images from 1910s and '20s America, particularly Frank Gilbreth's motion studies of bricklaying and postmark stamping. Gilbreth used filmmaking to study work routines in order to streamline workers' motion and optimize unit-time productivity. In his films, the worker and the workstation were placed against a white background with a grid pattern, next to a special clock (fig. 2b).[15] Both the clock and the grid were meant to help measure the worker's movements when the film was examined in slow motion, under the magnifying glass.[16] In *Inch of Time*, the grid was absent, yet the framing and attention to body movements were similar. Occasionally, a clock was placed in the mise-en-scène; at other times, the ticking of a clock could be heard in the soundtrack.

The role of film in Taylorist management had been known in China as early as 1914, when a newspaper article discussed cinema's use in America and Germany to measure and optimize workers' productivity.[17] By then,

14. See Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002), p. 4.

15. Some of Frank B. Gilbreth's film clips are online; see, for example, "Original Films Of Frank B Gilbreth (Part I)," archive.org/details/OriginalFilm

16. See Scott Curtis, "Images of Efficiency: The Films of Frank B. Gilbreth," in *Films that Work: Industrial Film and the Productivity of Media*, ed. Vinzenz Hediger and Patrick Vonderau (Amsterdam, 2009), p. 89.

17. Han Sheng (漢聲), "Huodong dianying yongwei guiding gongzuo chengji zhi qitan" (活動電影用為規定工作成績之奇談, The Intriguing Tale of Moving Cinema's Use for Standardizing Work Output), *Xiehe Journal* 4, no. 25 (1914): 5–7.

FIGURES 2a and 2b. A postal worker featured in Frank Gilbreth's film clip (circa. 1912) that studies how to optimize stamping motions for postal workers (left), and a Chinese postal worker at work in *An Inch of Time Is Worth an Inch of Gold* (1959) (right).

imported films had already become the newest entertainment in China's large cities, and reformers and educators had begun to be interested in the use of educational, scientific, and news films in industrialization and public education. This interest led to China's earliest concerted effort to produce educational films by Shanghai's Commercial Press between 1917 and 1926.[18]

In the 1950s, Chinese readers further learned about the efficacy of Taylorist motion-study films from *The Party on Cinema*, a collection of Vladimir Lenin's and Joseph Stalin's writings and speeches, initially published in Moscow in 1938 and translated and published in China in 1951. Having witnessed early cinema's industrial and educational use when on exile in England, Lenin explained in this volume how training of new workers on optimal work routines could be effectively done by sitting the workers down in the "film screening hall at the factory."[19] Reportedly, Lenin ordered screenings of short educational films on trains and steamships and set aside foreign exchange to import industrial and educational films from overseas for labor training.[20]

A predominantly agricultural society, China faced similar tasks of labor retraining in the 1950s as the Soviet Union did in Lenin's time. During the Great Leap, the state moved massive labor forces from agriculture into expanding industries; in 1958, 16.4 million peasants, about twice the total industrial labor force in 1957, were relocated to cities to support the expansion of industry and construction. The government also mobilized over one hundred million peasants to undertake large irrigation projects and to build and

18. See Wang Guangyan (王光艷), *Wenhua chuanbo yu meijie yanjiu* (文化傳播與媒介研究, Studies of Cultural Transmission and Media) (Wuhan, 2016), pp. 150–64.

19. Vladimir Lenin, "Liening lun zai shengchan helihua fangmian liyong dianying (1914)" (列寧論在生產合理化方面利用電影, Lenin on Using Cinema in Rationalizing Production), in *Danglun dianying* (黨論電影, The Party on Cinema), trans. Xu Guming (徐谷明), ed. N. Lebenov (Beijing, 1951), p. 26.

20. See ibid., p. 34.

operate "'backyard iron furnaces.'"[21] An industrial temporality wasn't easy to inculcate in an agricultural population. According to E. P. Thompson, workers in England took several generations to fully adapt to clock time during the Industrial Revolution.[22] Chinese state newspapers in the early 1950s frequently reported a lack of time discipline in industries.[23] Cinema became a convenient means to train time discipline and inculcate modern senses of time among the new industrial workers.

A Taylorist, rationalized temporality, however, was insufficient for building socialist modernity. Gilbreth's time-motion study films were management tools to discipline work and relate wages to unit productivity. Aware of this, trade unions had bitterly resisted Taylorism in the United States, Europe, and even in the Soviet Union.[24] A socialist modernity must rely on a complete reconceptualization of labor as an inherently creative and humanizing activity, where workers are no longer alienated from their labor and can have control of the production process. Elsewhere I've written on the Communist Party's reentry into China's industrial cities upon victories in the civil war and on the grassroots aspirations for labor self-governance that eventually became subjugated to production demands.[25] Facing the task of building national industries and having chosen to adopt a Soviet-style centralized economic planning, how could the PRC solve the contradiction in its labor politics, disciplining workers according to a rational, industrial time to maximize production for the state, yet still achieving a socialist modernity with unalienated labor?

While the beginning of *Inch of Time* featured a regular and authoritative clock time, the film quickly moved to connect temporality to politics, associating the revolution with kinetic energy and radical tempo. From images symbolizing traditional China's stagnation—the stone boat at the Summer Palace that sails nowhere and heavy carts and wooden ploughs pushed by

21. Wei Li and Dennis Tao Yang, "The Great Leap Forward: Anatomy of a Central Planning Disaster," *Journal of Political Economy* 113 (Aug. 2005): 845.

22. See E. P. Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism," *Past & Present* 38 (Dec. 1967): 56–97.

23. In the 1949 and 1950's *People's Daily*, one can find numerous critical reports on cadres and workers whose negligence regarding keeping time caused delays to work schedules, including Huang Mei (黄梅), "Jiaqiang shijian guannian, kaihui yao zhunshi!" (加強時間觀念 開會要準時, Strengthen the Sense of Time, Attend Meetings on Time!), *People's Daily*, 15 Apr. 1950, p. 6, and Du Huaiqing (杜淮青), "Yunshu liangshi bushou shijian, zaocheng renli wuli sunshi" (運輸糧食不守時間 造成人力物力損失, Lack of Time-Discipline in Grain Transportation Results in Losses of Labor and Substance], *People's Daily*, 26 July 1950, p. 4.

24. See Judith A. Merkle, *Management and Ideology: The Legacy of the International Scientific Management Movement* (Berkeley, 1980), p. 113.

25. See Ying Qian, "The Shopfloor as a Stage: Production Competition, Democracy, and the Unfulfilled Promise of *Red Flag Song*," *China Perspectives*, no. 2 (2015): 7–14.

manpower—*Inches of Time* cuts to a train rushing towards the camera at full speed, reminiscent of the Lumière brothers' *The Arrival of a Train* (1896). In the next sequence, the camera is placed on a moving vehicle, immersing the viewers in the experience of motor mobility similar to the phantom-ride films that had excited early film viewers. From the car window, one sees a modern Beijing ready to take off with well-built streets and a clock tower looming over its railway square. "In the past, a few hundred years were like one day; today, one day equals twenty years," announces the voice-over.

Speed and development became the hallmark of the revolutionary workers' state. In *Inch of Time*, workers were portrayed as self-actualizing and joyful at work, surpassing production quotas with will, skill, and command of technology. The film showcases a food-factory worker, whose adroit hands could wrap biscuits at four seconds per package with machine-like precision. While the calendar time was still 1959, she had already completed the production quota up to June 1961. Another worker at a machine-parts factory creatively retooled her machines, which allowed her to complete the production quota of fifty-seven months in merely sixteen months. As Taylorist images of work routine give way to workers' innovations and voluntarism, orchestral music begins to enrich the soundtrack with an ever-faster tempo and musical flourish. The film ends with a lively montage sequence where close-ups of clocks and images of workers and machines are intercut into a dance with each other, accompanied by a soundtrack where the ticking of a clock can still be heard, but is overwhelmed by a music fanfare in the allegro. Faster than the clock time, workers are the true vanguards whose productivity and voluntarism move society into the future.

Documenting Tomorrow: The Doco-Fiction of Artistic Documentary

In April 1958, the Central Film Bureau invited a group of filmmakers and writers to watch the latest crop of documentary films made at the height of the Great Leap Forward. After the screenings, the poet He Jingzhi (賀敬之) reportedly criticized those films for depicting the fruits of labor too modestly. *Spring in the Mountains* (*Shanqu de chuntian*, 山區的春天) (1958) and *Split Mountains to Bring Water* (*Pishan yinshui*, 劈山引水) (1958) had moved the poet with their monumental scenes of collective labor, but their endings—"just a few small trees and a small patch of irrigated rice paddies"—left him unsatisfied. Can documentary filmmakers "give us more splendid scenes of the spring and bigger waves of water?" asked He. Perhaps the films could end with the lush spring scenery taken from the water-abundant Yangtze region, to indicate this was what tomorrow would look like in the arid northern

regions too? After all, the poet asked, "Why can't documentary document tomorrow?"[26]

Writing a few months later, Ding Jiao (丁嶠), vice director of the Central Newsreel and Documentary Studio, recounted He Jingzhi's observations before expressing his agreement. Yes, documentary could document tomorrow, Ding wrote, because the future was already embodied in the present. People's aspirations for the future were a crucial part of the present that must be represented.[27]

These ponderings on whether documentaries could "document tomorrow" were part of a larger discussion concerning the new official aesthetic of "combining revolutionary realism with revolutionary romanticism" and how it could be applied to documentary.[28] First coined by Mao Zedong in March 1958 when discussing the future of Chinese poetry, this new formula was promptly adopted in literature and the visual arts. It emphasized the dialectical relationship between realist thinking and revolutionary aspiration and encouraged artists to use bold imagination in their work.

The foregrounding of imagination, however, posed a challenge to reality-based media such as documentary, and Ding Jiao observed that some filmmakers were reluctant to embrace it. These comrades needed to understand that dreams were also part of reality, argued Ding, because in a society progressing in such big strides, it would take only a short time for dreams to turn into reality. "Many seedlings of Communism have emerged, and many fairytale-like miracles, full of revolutionary romanticism, have occurred in the great tidal waves of life. Literature and art must fully reflect and passionately celebrate them," wrote Ding, who went on to identify "exaggeration and imagination" (*kuazhang he xiangxiang*, 誇張和想象) as the most important artistic strategies for revolutionary romanticism.[29]

The drive to combine revolutionary realism with revolutionary romanticism led to the development of a hybrid mode of cinema called artistic documentary (*yishuxing jilupian*, 藝術性紀錄片). Initially suggested by Zhou Enlai as a means to increase film production and represent the Great Leap Forward in a timely manner, artistic documentary was supposed to be based on real events but could employ professional actors and engage in considerable

26. Quoted in Ding Jiao, "Xinde tansuo: geming xianshi zhuyi yu geming langman zhuyi xiang jiehe de chuangzuo fangfa ruhe zai xinwen dianying zhong tixian" (新的探索：革命現實主義與革命浪漫主義相結合的創作方法如何在新聞電影中體現, New Explorations: How to Manifest the Creative Method of Combining Revolutionary Realism and Revolutionary Romanticism in News Films), *Dianying Yishu* (電影藝術, Film Art) (Jan. 1959): 5.

27. See ibid.

28. Ibid.

29. Ding Jiao, "Xinde tansuo," p. 6.

fictionalization and dramatization. Mostly shot on location and made quickly, artistic documentaries were compared to "special editions" of newspapers that reported same-day news.[30] By deploying both actors and nonactors who played themselves, the making of artistic documentaries also brought artists into closer collaboration with the working class, an approach encouraged since Mao Zedong's Yan'an talks of 1942.[31] More importantly, with the endorsement of exaggeration and imagination, these films enjoyed considerable formal fluidity and were not strictly bound to what had actually happened. Indeed, these films were often called new art films (*xin yishu pian*, 新藝術片), Great Leap films (*yuejin pian*, 躍進片), or documentary-style art films (*jiluxing yishu pian*, 紀錄性藝術片), foregoing the distinction between documentary and fiction altogether.[32] Film studios welcomed this creative opportunity: in 1958, forty-nine artistic documentaries were produced, amounting to 47 percent of total film production; over twenty more followed in the next two years.[33]

It's worth noting that both documentaries critiqued by He Jingzhi for their modest endings depicted reservoir constructions in the countryside. In the winter of 1957–58, huge campaigns were launched to mobilize villagers to build water conservancy and irrigation infrastructure. The goal was to rapidly increase the area of irrigated land, so as to boost grain production and support industrial expansion. In these constructions, labor mobilization was crucially important. Unlike in urban industries, where capital investment from the state drove production growth, the growth strategy in the countryside relied heavily on labor reorganization and mass mobilization.[34] According to Nicholas Lardy, labor need for infrastructure construction provided the greatest impetus to the formation of People's Communes at that time.[35] In 1957 and 1958, more than a hundred million rural people were mobilized to do rural construction work, which nearly doubled China's total irrigated area by the end of 1958.[36]

30. Yan Jizhou (嚴寄洲), "Women xuechao de cai bieren yuanyi chima?" (我們學炒的菜別人願意吃嗎, Would Others Be Willing to Eat the Dishes We Are Learning to Make?), in *Zhongguo dianying* (中國電影, Chinese Cinema), no. 4 (1959): 38.

31. See Mao Zedong, "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art," trans. pub., in *Modern Chinese Literary Thought: Writings on Literature, 1893–1945*, ed. Kirk Denton (Stanford, Calif., 1996), pp. 458–84.

32. See Yan Jizhou,"Women xuechao de cai bieren yuanyi chima?" p. 38.

33. See Shan Wanli, *Zhongguo jilu dianying shi*, p. 193.

34. See Nicholas R. Lardy, "The Chinese Economy under Stress, 1958–1965," in *The People's Republic, Part 1: The Emergence of Revolutionary China, 1949–1965*, ed. Roderick MacFarquhar and John K. Fairbank, vol. 14 of *The Cambridge History of China*, ed. Denis Twitchett and Fairbank (New York, 1987), p. 364.

35. See ibid.

36. See ibid.

Labor mobilization for rural construction projects, however, was not easy. These projects were highly contested at the grass roots because they aimed at drastic and unprecedented transformations of the local environment where villagers had lived and worked for generations. Receiving little capital investment from the state, these projects also relied on the villagers to perform long hours of backbreaking and often dangerous work with simple tools. Success stories and demonstrable benefits were needed to dispel doubts, minimize perceived risk, and encourage people to put in the hard labor for a better future. Yet in a nationwide campaign, infrastructure constructions happened simultaneously across the country. There was no time to wait for success stories to emerge in due time. The desire to "document tomorrow" arose from the entanglement between cinema production and these other material productions at this historical juncture. Instead of waiting for success stories to emerge in time, documentaries brought the future instantaneously into view to boost confidence in these massive infrastructure projects.

Mediated Futures: The Ming Tombs Reservoir

A landmark construction completed in record time (January–June 1958), the Ming Tombs Reservoir mobilized hundreds of thousands of people laboring around the clock. Due to its proximity to Beijing and its spectacular natural setting, the site drew many writers and artists from the capital and became a media sensation: the construction was richly represented in photography, painting, music, literature, and film. Even Henri Cartier-Bresson documented the reservoir construction in color photography when traveling through China that year.[37]

At least three films were made and widely circulated about the construction of the Ming Tombs Reservoir. A five-minute-long newsreel film *State Leaders At Work with Us* (*Lingxiu he women tong laodong*, 領袖和我們同勞動) (1958) documented top state cadres including Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai working at the reservoir construction site along with other volunteers. Besides the newsreel, two artistic documentaries were made: *Songs on the Reservoir* (*Shuiku shang de gesheng*, 水庫上的歌聲) (dir. Yu Yanfu [于彥夫], 1958) and *The Caprice of the Ming Tombs Reservoir* (*Shisanling shuiku changxiangqu*, 十三陵水庫暢想曲) (dir. Jin Shan [金山], 1958). Both were filmed at the reservoir before the construction's completion, and both sought to end on a satisfying success story.

Based on a real event adapted from reportage literature, *Songs on the Reservoir* told the story of a young village woman named Lanxiang who travelled to the Ming Tombs with her future father-in-law to visit her fiancé, a People's

37. See Henri Cartier-Bresson, "Red China Bid for a Future," *Life*, 5 Jan. 1959, pp. 44–61. The photos are also available at pro.magnumphotos.com/Catalogue/Henri-Cartier-Bresson/1958/CHINA-The-Great-Leap-Forward-1958-NN142462.html

Liberation Army (PLA) soldier volunteering on the construction site. Unable to find the soldier in such a large and congested place, and inspired by the spirit of voluntary work around them, the old man and the young woman plunged themselves into work. The loudspeaker on the site kept the family of three informed of each other's presence and achievements, before they finally met and a wedding was conducted for the two lovers on site.

Shot on location before the construction's completion, *Songs on the Reservoir* sought to depict success by moving the end of the film to a smaller construction at Lanxiang's home commune. An educated young woman, Lanxiang came to Ming Tombs not only to visit her fiancé but also to learn techniques to help her commune build its own irrigation system. The film's last ten minutes depicted the collective work of Lanxiang's commune in constructing a small reservoir near their village and celebrated its completion with ecstatic close-ups of water gushing into the fields. People from neighboring communes arrived to do what Lanxiang had done at the Ming Tombs: to learn how to build similar structures in their home area. Here the success story was not only the completion of the reservoir but the transmission of technological knowhow and will power from the Ming Tombs to countless communes, allowing its success story to be reproduced across rural China.

The other artistic documentary, *The Caprice of the Ming Tombs Reservoir*, similarly sought to demonstrate benefits from reservoir construction but took a different approach. While *Songs on the Reservoir* moved its ending from the Ming Tombs to Lanxiang's home commune, *The Caprice of the Ming Tombs Reservoir* stayed at the Ming Tombs, but "documented tomorrow": it included a thirty-minute postscript depicting a splendid communist world twenty years *after* the reservoir's completion.

Written by the veteran dramatist Tian Han (田漢) originally as a thirteen-act musical drama and adapted into film, *The Caprice of the Ming Tombs Reservoir* was based on real people's real stories collected by the playwright on his field trips to the Ming Tombs.[38] Its status as an artistic documentary or artistic film, however, gave license to its thoroughly hybrid text, which combined musical, melodrama, documentary, historical drama, and sci-fi all in one. As a musical, it featured numerous regional musical and dance numbers to celebrate socialist labor. As a documentary, it was shot on location, had actual model workers and their work teams play themselves, singing and working for the camera, and included newsreel footage of Mao Zedong working on the site. Finally, as Tian Han's response to the call for revolutionary romanticism, the film placed the present in a grand sweep of history,

38. For Tian Han's speedy and sleepless writing process for this play, in the spirit of the Great Leap Forward, see Paola Iovene, *Tales of Futures Past: Anticipation and the Ends of Literature in Contemporary China* (Stanford, Calif., 2014), p. 21.

including a prelude in historical drama mode on forced mass labor in imperial China, and a postscript in sci-fi mode offering an elaborate vision of the future.[39]

The postscript begins with an intertitle: "Twenty years later."[40] The camera slowly passes through bamboo groves to enter the front gate of the "Ming Tomb Communist Commune." Protagonists who had participated in the construction now reunite to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the reservoir's completion. Their tour of the commune reveals a future full of miracles. A single tree bears all kinds of fruits—apples, bananas, pears, pineapples—year round, all grains and vegetables grow and ripen regardless of seasons, and pigs weigh a thousand pounds each. As developments in medicine have cured cancer, reversed aging and prolonged life, most people look younger than twenty years before. Divisions no longer exist between mental and menial labor and between industry and agriculture; the commune operates steel factories and laboratories that minutely adjust the local weather and conduct research.

Besides being materially abundant and healthful, this future is also full of advanced media technology. A television set occupies a central position at the outdoor reunion party. It's through the TV monitor that many of the commune's activities—such as the research lab, pig farm and factories—are presented. Novel communication devices enable real-time long-distance video chats. As Taiwan has been recovered ten years previously, and rockets begin to fly to Mars, devices that look remarkably similar to the mobiles and laptops of today connect Beijing, Taipei, and the Mars-bound rocket in instantaneous communication.

Audiences today might laugh at these fanciful scenes, yet their placement in an artistic documentary urges us to imagine how they were viewed at the time. Trees bearing all kinds of fruits, grains ripening in all seasons, and tropical plants flourishing in the northern climate—this imagination of the future drew from widespread agricultural experiments of the time. In the 1950s, China's effort to modernize agriculture came under significant influence from the Soviet Union, where the now discredited Lysenko-Michurin doctrine had achieved hegemony.[41] Lysenko visited China in 1949 as an

39. See Tian Han (田漢), "Rang 'Shuikushang de gesheng' changbian quanguo" (讓'水庫上的歌聲'唱遍全國, Let "Songs on the Dam" Be Sung all over the Country), *Dazhong dianying* (大眾電影, Mass Cinema), 16 July 1958, p. 7.

40. For all subsequent quotations from the film, see *The Caprice of the Ming Tombs Reservoir*, dir. Jin Shan (1958).

41. Lysenko advocated an agricultural science that placed unwarranted confidence in species' unlimited abilities to adapt to new environments and then pass their own acclimatization to the offspring; see Loren Graham, *Lysenko's Ghost: Epigenetics and Russia* (Cambridge, Mass., 2016).

agricultural advisor.[42] Alexander Dovzhenko's 1948 biopic *Michurin* was shown widely in China the year after. School children read about Ivan Michurin's creation of a new fruit variety "pear apple" by graftage.[43] Newspapers reported various Michurin-inspired efforts to create new varieties that would drastically improve output and hardiness of the crops to thrive beyond their usual habitats.[44] Others attempted to create "gardens of a hundred fruits" by grafting various combinations of fruits and vegetables together.[45] In this context, it wouldn't be far-fetched to consider the fruit tree as an emergent reality, with its seedling in the present and its canopy stretching into the future.

Perching between documentary and fiction, *Songs on the Reservoir* and *The Caprice of the Ming Tombs Reservoir* were both reflexive regarding the importance of media and mediation for the Great Leap Forward. In *Songs on the Reservoir*, the loudspeaker served as a lynchpin in the plot. Its instantaneous broadcasting coordinated production competitions and kept workers abreast of the construction's progress as a whole. *The Caprice of the Ming Tombs Reservoir*, on the other hand, placed television and other screens of mediation at the center of the future. It was mainly through screen media that the film's protagonists, as well as its audience, witnessed the miracles to come of the Great Leap Forward (fig. 3). In 1958, television was already an emergent reality in China; the newly founded Beijing TV station transmitted to Beijing and its surroundings on 1 May, in China's first-ever TV broadcast. While China still lacked technology and infrastructure for nationwide broadcasting, cinema was leveraged to approximate television's instantaneous temporality and vast reach, and networks of film projectionists became the human infrastructure of distribution: they physically transported films across the country over difficult terrain, often by rudimentary means of transportation, bringing portable electric generators to power screenings in places not yet reached by electrification. This makeshift but highly effective assemblage of rapid dissemination allowed cinema to take millions of viewers on virtual tours of construction sites, as Lanxiang and other young people did in *Songs on the Reservoir*, so that they could replicate model success stories where they were.

Regularly shown on rural construction sites, which replaced village squares as the new open-air film arena, cinema validated and energized the construction. If cinema had since its early days been associated with the working class' leisure time, offering workers both sensory acclimatization

42. See Hua Shu (華恕), "Sulian nongye zhuanjia zai zhongguo" (蘇聯農業專家在中國, Soviet Agricultural Experts in China), *People's Daily*, 11 Nov. 1954, p. 2.

43. Wei Wenhua (魏文華), "Xiangcun xiaoxue yizhi hua" (鄉村小學一枝花, A Flower among Rural Elementary Schools), *People's Daily*, 13 Apr. 1959, p. 6.

44. See Liu Baiyu (劉白羽), "Jinhuang de pingguo" (金黃的蘋果, Golden Apples), *People's Daily*, 14 Apr. 1958, p. 8.

45. Wei Wenhua, "Xiangcun xiaoxue yizhi hua," p. 6.

FIGURE 3. Scenes from *The Caprice of the Ming Tombs Reservoir* (dir. Jin Shan, 1958) depicting the reservoir area twenty years into the future. Through the TV monitor, featured prominently in the outdoor party, the visitors see the climate-control center and the gate to the textile factory that the commune operates. A tablet device enables long-distance video conversation with a scientist on a rocket to the Mars.

to and therapeutic innervation from industrial capitalism, here leisure and work became unified/collapsed into one: people worked, sang, danced, and watched movies, all on the construction site where the future would be born. County-level film projection teams toured reservoir construction sites in Fujian, Hubei, Shandong, Hebei, Zhejiang, and Anhui.[46] Film programs such as "new film week" brought artistic documentaries, fresh from the cutting table, to reservoir construction sites, where they would be shown to tens of thousands of people in one screening.[47] Films were typically shown as double bills, and screenings often lasted until and beyond midnight. To accommodate large audience sizes, projectionists modified the projector to allow projection onto multiple screens, and developed special screens to show films in daylight,

46. See "Wei zhishui, zhishan, zhitu fuwu, faxing fangying zhanxian chuzheng desheng" (為治水、治山、治土服務，發行放映戰線出征得勝, To Serve Water, Mountain, Soil Control: The First Victories on the Distribution and Exhibition Front), *Dianying fangying* (Film Exhibition), no. 1 (1960): 2–4.

47. Lao Zhuang (老莊), "Gongdi juban xinpian zhanlan zhou" (工地舉辦新片展覽週, A Week of New Films Held on Construction Sites), *Film Exhibition*, no. 7 (1958): 21.

in order to avoid the drowsiness of night screenings after an exhausting day of work.[48]

Writing about cinema's revolutionary potential, Walter Benjamin exclaims: "Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second."[49] On the construction fields of rural China, cinema's *explosive* power became literal; after showing a double bill at one reservoir construction site, a film projection team in Shaanxi traveled for three hours overnight to reach another construction site. There they used the electricity generator meant for film projection to power homemade explosives and blew up a mountain for reservoir building.[50]

Useful Pasts: Folk Technologies for a Chinese Modernity

While future oriented, the Great Leap Forward also saw tremendous interest in folklore, mythology, and traditional arts and technologies. In *The Caprice of the Ming Tombs Reservoir*, the depiction of the communist future was a mixture of industrial and traditional aesthetics; the science labs followed a streamlined and functionalist aesthetic, yet the close-ups of fruits, grain, and pigs bore resemblance to traditional images of abundance like those in Chinese New Year's prints. Another popular artistic documentary *Huang Baomei* (黃寶妹) (dir. Xie Jin [謝晉], 1958), set in a textile factory in Shanghai, with the model worker Huang Baomei playing herself as the protagonist, ended with women textile workers turning into the beloved folkloric figures of seven weaving fairies dancing by their power looms (fig. 4).

An extensive literature exists on the politics of folklore in modern China.[51] Lydia Liu has shown that engagements with folklore in China's twentieth

48. For developing film screenings in daylight, see Lu Xinya (呂新亞), "Baizhou dianying" (白晝電影, Daytime Cinema), *Dianying jishu* (電影技術, Film Technology), no. 7 (1957): 29–30, and Zhang Shiyuan (張時元), "Woshi ruhe kaizhan fangying jishu gexin de" (我是如何開展放映技術革新的, How I Innovated in Film Exhibition Techniques), *Film Exhibition*, no. 4 (1960), p. 23. For experiments with exhibiting films simultaneously on multiple screens, and in daylight, see Li Mifang (李泌芳), "Baizhou dianying fangyicai, Gexin yuanli tianxinhua" (白晝電影放異彩, 革新園里開新花, The Marvelous Colors of Daylight Cinema: The New Flowers in the Garden of Innovation), *Film Exhibition*, no. 12 (1960): 28–30, and Ya Xuan (雅宣), Zheshe lutian dianying (折射露天電影, Reflected Open Air Cinema], *Film Exhibition*, no. 12 (1960): 30.

49. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Arendt (New York, 2019), p. 188.

50. See Fang Yunguang (方雲廣), "Zhandou zai shuili gongdishang de lueyang fangyingdui" (戰鬥在水利工地上的略陽放映隊, Lueyang Film Projection Team Fighting on Reservoir Construction Fields), *Film Exhibition*, no. 2 (1960): 17–18.

51. See Chang-tai Hung, *Going to the People: Chinese Intellectuals and Folk Literature, 1918–1937* (Cambridge, Mass., 1986).

FIGURE 4. Scenes from *Huang Baomei* (dir. Xie Jin, 1958). Textile workers enter the factory to work sleepless nights. Woman workers turn into the weaving fairy while working.

century were an entangled history of colonial mimicry, cultural governance, nationalist construction, and revolutionary struggles, with folklore serving different political aims at different times.[52] While earlier ideas on folklore—as authentic voice of the people and expression of national identity—continued to operate during the Great Leap Forward, a new fascination arose from the idea that folklore and mythology were age-old storehouses of people's aspirations and inventive ideas, ready to be revived and realized in cultural and material productions of the present. In an article titled "Reality and Fantasy" published on the *People's Daily*, the journalist Ye Mai (葉邁) writes: "Myths such as Chang'e flying to the Moon, Hou Yi hunting the Sun, Nü Wa mending the sky with stones, and Sun Wukong riding on the clouds. . . . Weren't they forerunners to today's gigantic efforts to transform nature?"[53] Describing

52. See Lydia H. Liu, "Translingual Folklore and Folklorics in China," in *A Companion to Folklore*, ed. Regina F. Bendix and Galit Hasan-Rokem (West Sussex, 2012), pp. 190–210.

53. Ye Mai (葉邁), "Huanxiang yu xianshi" (幻想與現實, Fantasy and Reality), *People's Daily*, 8 Aug. 1958, p. 6. Chang'e, Hou Yi, Nü Wa, and Sun Wukong are all figures from legends circulating in traditional China.

contemporary irrigation projects in his hometown, Ye argues that one could in fact find ideas, however unfinished and immature, in the legends circulating in the area, about how to transform nature in this specific locale.

Accompanying the Great Leap Forward in agricultural and industrial productions were the New Folksong Movement (新民歌運動) and the Peasant Painting Movement (農民畫運動). The folkloric register was understood as the language of the cultural grass roots through which the creativity of the masses could be released. Hundreds of thousands of peasant poets, songwriters, and painters emerged from these movements. Mural paintings by peasants covered village walls. Millions of new poems and folk songs were being written and collected, to the point that a paper shortage ensued and poetry submissions had to be transported in trucks or on shoulder poles.[54] The productivity of folk materials was documented widely. Another *People's Daily* article praised poems written by the masses for their formal incorporation of the rhythm of labor and the musicality of the spoken language. Because of their "simple, clear, and figurative" poetic language, these poems could spread more easily than poems written by intellectuals and could mobilize people most effectively.[55] The author reported that reading and writing poetry had already helped workers increase production and argued that cultural productions at the grass roots could directly inspire people to be bolder and more optimistic about their work.

Given that folk materials were so productive, it should come as no surprise that the Great Leap Forward also saw a revival of folk technologies. The call for increasing the production of "indigenous iron" (*tutie*, 土鐵) to support steel production began in December 1956, as the steel industry faced shortage of imported iron.[56] By mid-1958, the state began to promote "indigenous" metallurgical methods and mass operation of "indigenous furnaces" (*tugaolu*, 土高爐).[57] Local cadres and technicians searched in historical archives for metallurgical technologies, sometimes finding documentations from the Ming and Qing dynasties.[58] New handbooks of metallurgical technology gave instructions for building indigenous furnaces, some said to date back

54. See Xue Bing (薛冰), *Feng cong minjian lai* (風從民間來, The Wind Comes from Amidst the People) (Jinan, 2009), p. 103.

55. Shao Quanlin (邵荃麟), "Women de wenxue jinru le xinde shiqi" (我們的文學進入了新的時, Our Literature Has Entered a New Era), *People's Daily*, 6 Oct. 1958, p. 7.

56. "Quanguo shougongye hezuo zongshe haozhao zengchan tutie mibu gangtie yuanliao buzu" (全國手工業合作總社號召增產土鐵彌補鋼鐵原料不足, The National Handicrafts Cooperative Calls for an Increase in Indigenious Iron Production to Supplement Raw Material Shortage for Steel Industry), *People's Daily*, 27 Dec. 1956, p. 2.

57. *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo difangzhi fujian shengzhi yanjin gongye zhi* (中華人民共和國地方志 福建省志冶金工業志, China Local Historical Records: The Province of Fujian, History of the Metallurgical Industry) (Fuzhou, 2001), p. 108.

58. See ibid.

to "China's ancient times."[59] Such practices were revived and revised for grassroots production of iron, copper, and even steel in the country.

Technical drawings, however, were difficult for the technically inexperienced to decipher. For such technologies to spread, visual technologies such as film, photography and slide shows proved indispensable. In September 1958, three film factories—the CNDFF, the August 1 Film Factory, and the Science and Educational Film Factory in Beijing—received an urgent request to make instructional films on the building of backyard furnaces, "to propagate and spread the best techniques, so that tens of millions could learn these good technologies and begin to operate indigenous furnaces and flat furnaces nationwide."[60]

Upon receiving this task, the filmmaker Shi Mei (石梅) consulted technical manuals for iron production but found them hard to decipher. "I couldn't understand the technical terms. . . . An engineer tried to teach us, but I barely understood it." However, once she had been given a tour of an actual makeshift furnace, she found producing steel easy. "After the head of the factory showed us around, I felt that making steel wasn't so mysterious. If we hadn't broken the mystique of steel making, who could have thought that in a simple brick house, one could make steel using iron scraps and other everyday materials?"[61]

The films made by Shi Mei and her colleagues would soon offer countless viewers the opportunity to observe backyard furnaces in operation on film. The filmmakers travelled to Henan, Hebei, Shanxi, Sichuan, Guizhou, and Sichuan to document a variety of locally conceived and historically inspired metallurgical technologies. The CNDFF filmed seven documentaries within twelve days. The August First Film Factory completed five films within a similar time frame.[62]

Held at the National Film Archive in Beijing, these films are inaccessible to researchers today, but one can get a sense of how they might have looked like from a widely-circulated fifty-minute-long documentary entitled *Victory Song of Life* (*Shenghuo de kaige*, 生活的凱歌) (dir. Gao Weijin [高維進]

59. *Jinshu gongyi xue: Jinshu yelian* (金屬工藝學：金屬冶煉, Metallurgical Technology), ed. An Yanling (安延浚), 2 vols. (Beijing, 1959), 1:65.

60. Shi Mei (石梅), "Guangrong de shiming: wei gangtie er zhan!" (光榮的使命：為鋼鐵而戰!, A Distinguished Mission: Fighting the Battle for Steel and Iron!), *Dazhong dianying* (Mass Cinema), 26 Oct. 1958, p. 22. The film studios were the Central Newsreel and Documentary Studio, the August First Film Studio of the PLA, and the Science and Education Film Studio in Beijing.

61. Ibid., p. 22.

62. See "Shi'er bu jilu dagao gangtie duanpian jijiang quanguo shangying" (十二部紀錄大搞鋼鐵短片即將全國上映, Twelve Short Films Documenting the Great Steel and Iron Productions Will Be Shown Soon Nation-Wide), *Dazhong dianying* (Mass Cinema), 11 Oct. 1958, p. 27.

and Wang Yonghong [王永宏], 1958), which most likely used materials from these trips. The film demonstrated how to look for mineral reserves in the vicinity, build a furnace, channel the hot metal liquid through ceramic conduits into molds and, finally, modify donkey or ox carts to transport products to nearby factories for further processing.

When discussing the "view" aesthetic of early nonfiction cinema, Tom Gunning observes that early actuality films often depicted production processes that transformed raw material into consumer goods, culminating in an ending of "delighted consumption."[63] The Great Leap films that show the making of backyard furnaces can be understood as "process films" as well, though the process didn't yield any conventional consumer products. In *Victory Song of Life*, what's being delightfully savored on screen are the discovery of minerals in the vicinity of one's home, the power of vernacular technology for industrial development, and the newly minted iron and copper bars proudly bearing the name of the communes that made them (fig. 5). Gunning understands early nonfiction "process films" as enacting a "basic narrative of industrial capitalism."[64] They inspired awe among the audience towards mechanized and specialized industrial processes as part of capitalism's mystique. The process films of the Great Leap Forward, on the other hand, prompted direct action: they were the YouTube DIY videos of yesterday. Documenting the building of furnaces at elementary schools, in factories, and by farmlands, these films put forth convincing visual evidence for the efficacy of these folk technologies and called for nationwide emulation to build an indigenous future with them.

Class and Time: Wandering Intellectuals and Sleepless Labor

The Caprice of the Ming Tombs Reservoir featured a group of intellectuals visiting the construction site to learn from workers. Among this group was a retrograde writer named Hu. In the film, Hu tries to interview a train driver who has just risked his life to stop a train accident on the construction site.

"Did you think of the consequences?" Hu asks. "You might have been injured, disabled, or killed."

"Everything happened in a few seconds; I had no time to think," answers the driver.

"You must have thought about it," Hu insists. "Maybe you have forgotten."

Upon hearing this, the train driver gets up impatiently, protesting that he has no time to talk and must return to his work.

63. Tom Gunning, "Before Documentary: Early Nonfiction Films and the 'View' Aesthetic," in *Uncharted Territory: Essays on Early Nonfiction Film* (Amsterdam, 1997), p. 17.

64. Ibid., p. 17.

FIGURE 5. Scenes from *Victorious Song of Life* (1958) demonstrating how to work with backyard furnaces.

The writer Hu will not let him go. "I have one more question for you. What were your happiest moments this past year?"

The train driver says loudly, "Being educated by the party."

"And what were your most unhappy moments?"

The train driver explodes with outrage. "I have nothing to be unhappy about," he yells furiously. "The only time when I feel unhappy is when I am asked such strange questions!"

In an otherwise upbeat film, this scene stands out as a rare moment where negative emotions are expressed. Here the intellectual was rebutted for luring the worker to think in selfish terms. But why did the worker get so outraged by these questions?

Jacques Rancière defines aesthetics as "the distribution of the sensible."[65] An aesthetic marks certain things as self-evident, while shunning others as senseless. It determines what can be perceived and comprehended and what cannot be. The politics of aesthetics is both inclusive and exclusionary; those

65. See Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London, 2013).

who abide by the system of self-evident facts form a community with a common horizon of sensibility, while those who do not abide by it are banished from the community. Aesthetics delimits the community and determines its capacity: what it can feel, communicate, and do.

Rancière's discussion sheds light on the driver's outrage. Indeed, Hu's questions do not make *sense* within the temporality of the Great Leap Forward. To answer them required taking a pause from time's breathless forward march and involved thinking about risk, failure, exhaustion, unfulfilment, all of which had been banished from the Great Leap's timeline of optimism. Indeed, those who asked the questions were mood spoilers and time wasters: they were intellectuals.

Intellectuals were seen to have a problematic relationship with time. Artistic documentary came into existence partly because filmmakers were deemed incapable of creating stories relevant to the changing times on their own. At a meeting with filmmakers in May 1958, the head of the film bureau, Chen Huangmei (陳荒煤), described the problems facing intellectuals: "Our bodies have entered socialism, but . . . our hearts have remained in capitalism. Time is moving forward, but [filmmakers] are lagging behind, hesitating, pacing back and forth, or even looking back nostalgically at things already rotting away." Intellectuals should have been society's vanguard, "serving as trumpeters in revolutionary marches."[66] But instead, intellectuals' deep enmeshment with capitalist and bourgeois thinking had made them hopelessly backward.

Like many other artistic documentaries of the time, *The Caprice of the Ming Tombs Reservoir* was as much a celebration of socialist labor as a conversion story for intellectuals. By the end of the film, intellectuals are shown joining the working class—they work at the commune and have married workers and peasants. However, two intellectuals don't reform enough to make this conversion. The writer Hu made a hasty exit after his selfishness and disloyalty were exposed and never appeared in the film's segment on the future. The other intellectual, Professor Wang, does appear at the reunion, yet unlike the others who, thanks to improvements in medical science, look younger and healthier than twenty years before, he looks old and decrepit. At the end of the film, as the rest of the people energetically party through the night, Professor Huang succumbs to the inertia of his body and falls asleep.

66. Chen Huangmei (陳荒煤), "Zai dianying yuejinhui shang de fayan" (在電影躍進會上的發言, Speech at the Meeting to Discuss the Great Leap Forward in Cinema), in *Zhongguo Dianying Yanjiu Ziliao: 1949–1979* (中國電影研究資料, Research Materials for Chinese Cinema: 1949–1979), ed. Wu Di (吳迪) (Beijing, 2006), p. 198.

The working class didn't have the intellectuals' burden to reform themselves from their bourgeois ways; workers were the carrier of revolutionary temporality. Yet the working class also had their own burdens. They had little time to sleep. Overtime and extra shifts had been frequent as early as 1956, when the deadline to meet production targets of the first Five-Year Plan approached. During the Great Leap Forward, overtime became normalized as workers were mobilized to work around the clock to create productivity surges.[67] Cinema helped perpetuate a culture of sleeplessness. Film screenings often ran from end of work to around midnight. Reported experiments with daytime cinema to avoid drowsiness offered a glimpse into labor exhaustion. The prevalence of overtime, the reckless increase of production speed, and the general inexperience of a rapidly expanding labor force resulted in a sharp rise in reported workplace accidents.[68] Meanwhile, the emphasis on reducing production costs led to cutbacks in workers' welfare, salary and overtime pay.[69] The real wage for workers in Shanghai, for example, substantially declined between 1958–60.[70]

On sleeplessness in late capitalism, Jonathan Crary writes: "24/7 is a time of indifference, against which the fragility of human life is increasingly inadequate and within which sleep has no necessity or inevitability. In relation to labor, it renders plausible, even normal, the idea of working without pause, without limits. It is aligned with what is inanimate, inert, or unageing."[71] Sleepless labor in China's high socialism reveals a fundamental contradiction in China's socialist experiment. Workers were supposed to rule the country and own the means of production. Yet despite the state's attempt to institute democratic management practices in factories, by late 1950s, these institutions' limits became increasingly clear and labor interests remained subordinate to the developmental state's priority on industrial productivity and capital accumulation.[72] The Great Leap Forward was launched at a time of increasing labor unrest, when workers protested against stagnating wages, authoritarian assignments, and unsatisfactory working and living conditions, aggravated by the weakening of trade unions across the country.[73]

67. See Yiching Wu, *The Cultural Revolution at the Margins: Chinese Socialism in Crisis* (Cambridge, Mass., 2014), pp. 100–01.

68. See Jackie Sheehan, *Chinese Workers: A New History* (New York, 1998), p. 90.

69. See ibid., pp. 55–57.

70. See Yiching Wu, *The Cultural Revolution at the Margins*, p. 99.

71. Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (New York, 2013), pp. 9–10.

72. For discussions of the party's efforts at creating democratic institutions at workplaces and these institutions' limitations, see Sheehan, *Chinese Workers*, pp. 13–46.

73. Industrial unrest became prominent by the end of 1956, and continued through the first half of 1957; see ibid., p. 47; François Gipouloux, *Les cent fleurs à l'usine: Agitation ouvrière et crise du modèle soviétique en Chine, 1956–1957* (Paris, 1986), p. 189; and Elizabeth J. Perry,

Yet few of these contestations made it into cinema. The train driver's happiest moment was being "educated by the party," which placed him on the receiving and passive end of politics. Even when workers were portrayed as assuming active roles in managing production, as in *Huang Baomei*, "backward" voices and feelings were few and quickly abandoned in favor of a consensus for scoring further production surges. A few traces of labor discontent had existed in the published screenplay of *Huang Baomei*, such as a visibly distraught woman worker travelling by bus to work on a Sunday, but they were nowhere to be found in the completed film.[74]

Conclusion

In a society engaged in engineering its own radical transformation, aesthetics is of vital importance. Revolutionary transformations, by nature, usher in upheavals in epistemology, perception, and common sense. At the same time, revolutionary social transformations fundamentally shift the existing class structure: old classes lose ground, while new classes come into formation. Redefining what's sensible and possible in such situations is extremely difficult and involves contending political interests and ethical and technical judgements. Aesthetics, as the "distribution of the sensible," becomes the ground where fierce battles are fought—over new parameters of possibility, belonging, and exclusion and over how the society perceives its present strivings in relation to its past and future. At the center of these battles, cinema became a heavily governed mass art, subjected to "cycles" of denunciation campaigns and regulations in the first decade of the PRC.[75]

This essay has recounted the ways in which cinema, as a form of technologized media promoted by the state, propelled the Great Leap Forward as a productive force. In fact, cinema was so deeply and widely entangled with practices of labor and technology at the time that it would be impossible to imagine a Great Leap Forward without it. However, such a powerful media that fuelled the Great Leap Forward also spectacularly failed to register contending voices and grasp risk, exhaustion, and possibilities of failure. It enlivened this massive social experiment but also spelt its demise. No revolution could succeed with such a circumscribed means of mediation, which seemed to alleviate but in effect intensified epistemological difficulties,

"Shanghai's Strike Wave of 1957," *The China Quarterly*, no. 137 (1994): 1–27. On the weakening of the trade unions, see Sheehan, *Chinese Workers*, pp. 13–46, and Yiching Wu, *The Cultural Revolution at the Margins*, p. 99.

74. See Chen Fu (陳夫) and Ye Ming (葉明), "Fangwen Huang Baomei" (訪問黃寶妹, Visiting Huang Baomei), *Zhongguo dianying* (Chinese Cinema), no. 8 (1958): 66.

75. See Zhuoyi Wang, *Revolutionary Cycles in Chinese Cinema: 1951–1979* (New York, 2014), pp. 25–44.

escalating them to disastrous levels. Indeed, just when cinema had visualized the communist future so concretely, made it so palpable, just when films had travelled to construction sites to energize labor and spread technology to bring forth a new and better world, the communist future was slipping out of reach.

Despite all the hard work that went into the Great Leap Forward, the campaign ended tragically. National grain output plunged by 15 percent in 1959 and another 16 percent in the following two years.[76] The drop in agricultural yield was explained partly by the excessive rural labor input dedicated to infrastructure building, which meant fewer hours spent on agricultural production. Many irrigation projects were poorly designed with inadequate drainage, resulting in increased soil salinity and reduction in agricultural yields, especially on the North China Plain.[77] Industry collapsed in the cities.[78] Tens of millions of newly urbanized workers were resettled back to the countryside. The backyard furnaces turned out highly inefficient, leading to tremendous waste of raw materials and deforestation. In 1959, a quarter of the iron produced in the country was too low in quality to be used in steel production.[79] The drop in grain output and excessive procurement were among the leading reasons for widespread famine in 1959–1961 in rural China, resulting in massive loss of life on the scale of tens of millions.[80]

As the first major setback to China's socialist experiment, the failure of the Great Leap Forward and the subsequent famine had devastating consequences. One could argue that the power struggles both at the center and at the grass roots that fuelled the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) had at least partly to do with the grievances from this period, which were unequally distributed between urban and rural China, between the grassroots and the bureaucracy.

76. See Wei Li and Dennis Tao Yang, "The Great Leap Forward," p. 841.

77. See Lardy, "The Chinese Economy under Stress, 1958-1965," p. 370.

78. See Kenneth Lieberthal, "The Great Leap Forward and the Split in the Yenan Leadership", in *The People's Republic, Part 1: The Emergence of Revolutionary China, 1949–1965*, p. 318. Light industrial output decreased by 9.8 percent in 1960, by 21.6 percent in 1961 and another 8.4 percent in 1962. Heavy industrial output declined 46.6 percent in 1961 as compared to 1960, and another 22.2 percent in 1962 over 1961; see Ma Hong (馬洪), "Jinji tiaozheng he fazhan sudu" (經濟調整和發展速度, Economic Adjustment and Speed of Development), *People's Daily*, 29 Dec. 1981, p. 5.

79. See Mao Jianxin (茅建鑫), "'Dayuejin' yundong zhongde gongye 'jishu geming'" ("大躍進" 運動中的工業"技術革命," The "Revolution of Industrial Techniques" during the "Great Leap Forward" Movement), *Jiangsu daxue xuebao (shehui kexue ban)* (江蘇大學學報[社會科學版], Journal of Jiangsu University [Social Science Edition]) 5 (July 2013): 45.

80. See Wei Li and Dennis Tao Yang, "The Great Leap Forward," pp. 840–77, and James Kai-sing Kung and Justin Yifu Lin, "The Causes of China's Great Leap Famine, 1959–1961," *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 52 (Oct. 2003): 51–73. See also Wemheuer and Manning, introduction to *Eating Bitterness*, p. 10, for other studies reaching similar results.

In contrast to the well-represented Great Leap Forward, the Great Famine that followed left tens of millions dead and almost no images. The heavily mediated Great Leap Forward and the famine without mediation further alert us to the imbrications between politics and technicity, aesthetics and ethics, as we attempt to come to terms with the promises and failures of China's radical transformation.