

Cinematic Regimes and the Disappearing Factory in China

Ren Hai

Abstract: With the growth of creative economies in many countries worldwide, how does cinematic art address the disappearance of the factory—the symbol of an industrial economy? In this paper, the categorisation of three artistic regimes (ethical, representational and aesthetic) by the French philosopher Jacques Rancière are used to investigate the engagement of cinematic art with the gradual disappearance of factories in modern China. Ethical cinema deals with the factory as part of the everyday activities of a community reconfigured by the decline of traditional industries or a shift to post-industrial production. Representational cinema focuses on factory workers both as a collective and as individuals. In this model, workers are disciplined and docile, and may even be re-trained to suit new divisions of labour in the global economy. In aesthetic cinema, the factory is a mode of experience that elucidates temporal and intellectual equalities. Examining these three cinematic regimes offers critical insights into cinematic art and aesthetics in the context of China's creative economy.

Keywords: Jacques Rancière, regimes of art, regimes of cinema, ethical regime, representational regime, aesthetic regime, disappearing factory, “made in China”, “created in China”

电影艺术模式与消失中的工厂

任 海

摘 要: 世界各国努力地发展创意经济之时, 电影艺术如何面对传统工

业的消失? 本文采用法国哲学家雅克·朗西埃关于艺术模式的理论来探讨电影艺术如何处理当代中国正在消失的工厂这一主题。文章分析了三种电影艺术模式: 伦理模式的电影把工厂当成一个转型社区日常生活的一部分, 或者是传统工业消失的挑战, 或者是向后工业式的生产转变; 再现模式的电影对工厂的解读把工人同时当成群体与个体来看待, 工人被再现为是顺从的, 遵守纪律的, 被重新培训以适应全球经济的劳动分工; 美学模式的电影则把工厂作为一种美学经历来处理, 在这种经历中, 时间与理智的平等变得可以理解。通过对这三种电影艺术模式的探讨, 本文最终的目的是认识并反思中国创意经济中的电影艺术与美学。

关键词: 雅克·朗西埃, 艺术模式, 电影艺术模式, 伦理模式, 再现模式, 美学模式, 消失的工厂, “中国制造”, “创意中国”

DOI: 10.13760/b.cnki.sam.201502011

In recent years, the Chinese economy has shifted from a manufacturing-based (“made in China”) model to a creativity-based (“created in China”) model. As observed in many other countries around the world, factories no longer play a significant role in the spatial organisation of Chinese society. How does cinematic art address the disappearance of China’s factories? In this paper, the tripartite categorisation of artistic regimes (ethical, representational and aesthetic) proposed by the French philosopher Jacques Rancière is used to examine the cinematic representation of China’s disappearing factories. Ethical cinema, exemplified by such films as *West of the Tracks* (2002) and *American Dreams in China* (2013), addresses the factory as part of the everyday activities of communities reconfigured by the decline of traditional industries or a shift to post-industrial production. Representational cinema, such as the films *Manufactured Landscapes* (2006) and *24 City* (2008), portrays factory workers both as a collective and as individuals. Representational films present workers as disciplined and docile; factory employees may even be retrained in response to new divisions of labour in the global economy. In aesthetic cinema, such as *The Piano in a Factory* (2011), the factory is a mode of experience that elucidates temporal

and intellectual equalities. Aesthetic cinema also challenges the institution of cinematic art itself. Examining these three cinematic regimes offers critical insights into cinematic art and aesthetics in the context of China's developing creative economy.

I . Cinematic Regimes

The French philosopher Jacques Rancière (2009; 2010; 2013) identified three artistic regimes: the ethical regime of images, the representational regime of the arts and the aesthetic regime of art. (see also Davis, 2010; Rockhill & Watts, 2009; Smith & Weisser, 2011) Each regime comprises a network of relationships that configures the interpretation of an object, act or practice as art. (Davis, 2010, p.134) From a Foucauldian perspective, the term “regime” implies that the definition, practice and elucidation of art are connected with the administration of society at both an individual and a collective level.

In *The Republic* (2011), Plato raised concerns about the potentially damaging pedagogical influence of poetic images, and the effects of poetry and theatre on the harmonious organisation of a city. He claimed that the images produced in poetry or theatrical performance affect the “ethos” of individuals and whole communities. Accordingly, the production of images raises ethical questions in fields such as dance as therapy, poetry as education and theatre as (civic) festival. In the ethical regime, art is not recognised as an autonomous domain; the regime is characterised by images rather than by art.

According to Aristotle's theory of mimesis, art is separate from life to the extent that it imitates life. For example, a painted smoking pipe is a representation of a pipe rather than a pipe itself. Accordingly, René Magritte named his 1928 painting of a pipe “This is not a Pipe” (*Ceci N'est pas une Pipe*). (D'Alessandro & Draguet, 2013) In mimetic or representational practice, art is an autonomous domain with its own set of guiding principles. These principles produce a hierarchy, in which the artist's know-how (*savoir-faire*) is distinguished from both the artisan's know-how and the entertainer's know-how. Fine art is understood to be regulated by an agreement between *poiesis* (“making”) and *aisthesis* (sensory perception,

which is affected by *poiesis*). In the representational regime, artists' capacity to create art is closely connected with their form of expression. The creators of trade paintings at Dafen, Shenzhen, for example, are not recognised as artists despite their artistic training and aspirations (Wong, 2014).

In the aesthetic regime, the hierarchical rules of the representational regime are abolished. Aesthetic art promotes the equality of subjects, the dissolution of genres and the indifference of style to content. Therefore, Magritte's hyper-realistic representation of a pipe in "This is not a Pipe", which looks less like a painting than a photographic image, is recognised as art. In the aesthetic regime, any object can be an artwork and any activity can give rise to an artwork. In his 1917 "Fountain", a porcelain urinal, Marcel Duchamp crossed representational borders and challenged both the status of art objects and the institution of the art museum to claim artistic recognition for a "readymade"—a mass-produced artefact usually associated with large-scale industrial production. (Lash & Lury, 2007, p. 70; Roberts, 2007, p. 34) Within China's modern creative economy, the workers who produce trade paintings at Dafen can access recognition as artists, and their paintings may be viewed as interventions in the field of conceptual art, continuing a theme initiated by Duchamp. As a result, the boundaries between components of art and components of ordinary life are eroded. The aesthetic regime is characterised by ongoing negotiation between art as life and art for art's sake. Therefore, the creators of aesthetic art emphasise *aisthesis* (a mode of experience in which things are both sensibly and intellectually perceived as belonging to art) over *poiesis*.

The three regimes proposed by Rancière differ in their historical development and recognition. As noted by Gabriel Rockhill and Phil Watts (2009, p. 9), the ethical regime of images came into being in Plato's Greece; the representational regime of the arts originated in Aristotle's Greece, and became fully established in the 17th and 18th centuries; and the aesthetic regime of art has gained increasing recognition since the 19th century. The ethical and representational regimes have coexisted since the 17th century, and all three regimes have been in place since the 19th century. Their coexistence produces tension within both single works and whole art forms. (Davis,

2010)

The imperative of ethical engagement is increasingly prevalent in today's global creative economy. Artists are pressured to relate their work to society, and artistic value is measured by its social and economic influence. (see Bishop, 2012; Condry, 2013; Finkelppearl, 2013; Hewison, 2014; Lash & Lury, 2007; Pang, 2012) According to W. J. T. Mitchell, the image (“a disembodied motif” or “phantom”) is social because it circulates between pictures (“concrete embodied object[s]”) and other media. (2005, p.72) In other words, an image is materialised by a picture—which may fully or partially embody the image—in the process of circulation (or “distribution of the sensible”, in Rancière's words). Once materialised and in circulation, images in the form of pictures are often understood to have “desires”. In light of Mitchell's work, “the ethical regime of images” can be renamed “the ethical regime of pictures” to emphasise the role of affects such as desire. Cinema is clearly one of the most important media responsible for materialising pictures with needs and desires. Animation is not limited to animated films; it is the foundation of all cinematic genres. Terms such as “animation” and “live action” are not merely vitalist metaphors; they also refer to the vivification of images by their embodiment in pictures. Therefore, the ethical regime of pictures can also be called the ethical regime of cinema.

Whereas ethical cinema is affective, representational cinema is fine art. It is institutionalised by the establishment of film genres and by academic and professional training and qualifications in filmmaking. Action, animation, comedy, documentary, horror, musical, romance, biography, drama, mystery, science fiction and thriller are all popular film genres. However, their prevalence differs between countries. “Westerns” comprise an important genre in the United States but not in China. Chinese-language films are grouped with other non-English films. Filmmakers are recognised as artists and treated differently from non-professionals, amateurs and “prosumers”. In Chinese film studies, professional Chinese filmmakers are commonly distinguished by “generation” (*dai*). For example, Zhang Yimou belongs to the fifth generation of professional Chinese filmmakers, and Jia Zhangke is a member of the sixth generation. In the representational regime, the centrality

of genre and the recognition of filmmakers as artists create not only social distinctions but qualitative distinctions between filmmakers, their works and the value of their labour. The resulting hierarchy is intrinsic to the creative economy because it determines the relative value of celebrities. For example, filmmakers are treated as cultural icons that may be appropriated to promote the cultural and economic values of a city, a site, a real-estate project or an event.

With the increasingly widespread use and popularity of the Internet, digital cameras and smart phones, the artistic practice of filmmaking has been freed from the institution of cinema. In the aesthetic regime, anyone can become a filmmaker, and film genres can represent what Paola Voci (2010) calls “small-screen realities”—cinematic experiences that are individualised and mediated, especially by the Internet. Representatives of the creative industries often stress that everybody can be creative and produce art. In practice, however, this would be impossible even if everyone owned the smart phones or other devices necessary to produce films. Aesthetic cinema continues to negotiate between cinematic art as life and cinematic art as art, challenging the reduction of cinematic art to its social and economic influence and making the unthinkable thinkable. Aesthetic cinema thus fulfils the potential of cinema to create an intellectual mode of experience.

II. The Disappearing Factory

What does it mean to speak of “the disappearing factory”? This disappearance is not a simple fact or phenomenon; it has multiple meanings and implications. First, it describes the rapid changes that make a factory transient. A factory in transition passes through the present to become part of the past. It exists only as a memory, yet leaves material traces such as images, pictures and text. The factory may be physically transient; it may be demolished or repurposed. More importantly, however, the concept of transience offers a way of perceiving and understanding the factory’s disappearance. On the one hand, the disappearance of a factory leads to unemployment, welfare loss and insecurity for workers whose lives previously revolved around the norm of full-time (40 hours per week) employment. On

the other hand, the disappearance of the factory may reduce pollution (industrial noise and waste) and improve air and water quality. Emptying a factory, both physically and socially, makes the site of the factory available for other uses.

Second, a disappearing factory is deprived of the signifying power of an operational factory, even when the factory building still exists. For instance, the factory no longer provides social, political or economic indices. In socialist China, the term “factory” (*gongchang*) usually referred to a state-owned factory. More specifically, China’s planned economy-owned factories made up the work-unit (*danwei*) system that provided welfare services. The *danwei* system was culturally distinct from capitalist social welfare systems such as that in the United States. Once a Chinese (state-owned) factory has been shut down, it signifies not only the decline of China’s planned economy welfare system but the decline of planned economy welfare systems more generally. In turn, this decline indirectly damages Western welfare provision (as exemplified by the United States’ welfare system), because socialist and capitalist countries competed during the Cold War to improve welfare provision and thereby shape the world order.

The disappearance of the factory is also due to its international marginalisation. Factories are perceived around the world as low-cost and labour-intensive workplaces. Expressions such as “designed in [country X]” and “made in [country Y]” reinforce the perceived division of labour between intellectual work in one country and manual labour in another, and help to categorise countries as either creators and innovators or manufacturers and producers. In 2010, a group of Chinese students studying in the United States released a music video called *Made in China* (Xing, 2010). The singer, a male student wearing traditional Chinese clothing, expressed national pride by identifying China as the origin of numerous commodities available in the United States. Reflecting on the stereotypical view of China as the world’s low-cost factory floor, he called for a change in China’s economic emphasis from *zhizao* (making or manufacturing) to *chuangzao* (creating or innovating). The image of the factory as a socially marginalised workplace has also been reinforced by media attention to inhumane working conditions

and labour abuses, and incidents such as the collapse of the eight-storey Rana Plaza in Bangladesh in April 2013, which killed more than 1,130 workers.

The third meaning of the disappearing factory concerns displacement. The conventional image of the factory is replaced by images of production that are usually characterised as post-industrial and consumption-oriented. For example, tourist theme parks and shopping malls are consumption oriented built environments. They are not viewed as productive sites because the methods of their production are intentionally concealed from tourists and consumers. Maintenance work, mechanical operations and management take place backstage, whereas performers and sales staff are positioned on the front line, delivering services with smiling faces and professional attitudes. (Ren, 2013, Chapter 4) For example, the front-line employees at Disney's theme parks are called "cast members", and wear uniforms and masks that reinforce the timeless image of Disney (land) as "the happiest place on earth". The international division of labour also creates the impression that countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom are consumer-oriented, post-industrial societies in which factories are redundant. Many consumers in the United States have encountered the tragic images of garment workers killed in the collapse of Rana Plaza in Bangladesh in April 2013, and some have even donated money to the victims. Nevertheless, consumers in the United States do not directly associate garments produced at low cost by such brands as Joe Fresh, the Limited, GAP, Banana Republic and H&M with the plight of garment workers in Bangladesh and elsewhere.

How are the implications of the disappearing factory represented in each of the three cinematic regimes proposed by Rancière? How does cinematic experience produce the disappearing factory as an object of thought? To answer these questions, I treat the disappearing factory as a site of exchange between everyday life and the realm of art; between changes in the regulative norms of everyday life and changes in the artistic strategies used to make the factory intelligible.

III. Ethical Cinema

In ethical cinema, the disappearing factory is both a major narrative

theme and a symbol of changes to the spatial organisation of society. In the mid-1990s, as part of the Chinese government's industrial reforms, some state-owned factories—mainly institutions that were unproductive or incapable of compensating their workers—were allowed to go bankrupt. Almost 58,000 bankruptcy cases were accepted by the courts between 1996 and 2003. (Lee, 2007, p. 50) These factories had previously employed a huge number of workers in Chinese cities across the country. Many of the laid-off workers despaired of their futures, having depended on the factories in every area of their lives—employment, education, housing, healthcare, marriage, child-rearing, entertainment, etc. (see Lü, 2007).

Wang Bing's 2001 film *Tiexi Qu: West of the Tracks* is structured around the decline of factories in Tiexi District in Shenyang, one of China's most important industrial regions during the planned economy era. The film is more than 547 minutes long, and is divided into three parts: "Rust" (*Gongchang*), "Remnants" (*Yanfenjie*) and "Rails" (*Tielu*). It took Wang a year and a half to produce the film, using a consumer digital video camera. He took the role of a participant observer by living among his informants, some of whose stories he documented at length. The film weaves together the details of a factory's transformation with numerous stories reported by workers, their families and local residents into an epic narrative of the decline of industrial life. "Rust", the longest of the film's three parts, documents the operations of factory equipment, a steel foundry, an assembly line and a huge crane moving across a workshop. These scenes not only represent the factory's production process, but also record the everyday lives of industrial workers. During breaks from work, some of the workers listen to the radio, some chat about issues related to unemployment, salaries and retirement, and others talk nonsense, play poker and Chinese chess, have lunch and wash. In contrast with the excitement, pride, happiness and optimism, these workers are tired, anxious, depressed and bored. Therefore, the film establishes a parallel between the decay of China's factories and the worsening plight of industrial workers.

W. J. T. Mitchell argues that the provocative question "what do pictures want?" epitomises the whole investigation into the desires of minority or

subaltern groups. (2005, p. 29) I reframe his question to address *Tiexi Qu*: “What does this film (an example of a picture) want?” To answer the second question, the desires of the workers portrayed in the film must be addressed. The workers are explicitly identified as members of the working class—a marginalised group within modern Chinese society (Lü, 2007). They may even be regarded as a new class of subalterns with new demands and desires. However, the filmmaker provides no clear answers; the subjects appear to want nothing. In “Remnants”, two young men talk about their future plans:

I don't know. Why are you asking me? I don't know what I'm going to do.
Not a single ideal, just like me.
Fuck, why do you describe me like that?
As stubborn as me, with no ideals.
What is an ideal?
Fuck!
What is an ideal?
What is an ideal; what is an ideal?
I'm just chatting with you, aren't I?
Is an ideal eatable, like food?
What is an ideal? ①

It would be reductive to argue that the young men are too practical to care about the future. If an ideal (*lixiang*) is a future-oriented hope, the men lack ideals, because they have no hope for the future. However, this absence of ideals and hope—and thus the absence of a future—precisely describes their sense of historical time. The sense of future uncertainty or unreliability described by the young men is part of the historical time of the disappearing factory. What will replace China's disappearing state-owned factories? What new way of life will emerge as the lifestyle intimately shaped by the factory system recedes? In *Tiexi Qu*, the image of the disappearing factory becomes what Walter Benjamin calls a “dialectical image”, capturing the historical process at a standstill. Indeed, the filmmaker stated that “the factory is my master” (*gongchang jiushi wo de zhuren*) (Lü, 2007). This statement

① This is my translation.

appears to echo an old Marxist question: “Who is the master of history?” For the filmmaker, the answer can only be found in historical memories (the past of the disappearing factory); it cannot be accessed in a non-sensible future.

With the closure of many state-owned factories in China, workers have been laid off and workshops emptied and demolished. Anything can happen during such a transition. An emptied factory can be appropriated for other purposes, as depicted in Peter Chan’s feature film *American Dreams in China* (*Zhongguo Hehuoren*, 2013). In the film, three college classmates and close friends build an English-language school called “New Dreams” (*Xin Mengxiang*) in the ruins of an abandoned factory. The conventional mode of living represented by the *danwei* system is replaced by what I call the “do it yourself” (DIY) lifestyle—an individualised approach to life as a series of projects (Ren, 2013). The DIY way of life is commonly characterised by entrepreneurship. Although the three friends/colleagues have different methods of teaching English, they all incorporate their own life-building experiences into their teaching. Cheng Dongqing, the school’s principal, uses his own dating experience to teach students the meanings of English words such as “horny” and “aesthetics”. Wang Yang, the only one of the three to have had an American girlfriend, uses Hollywood films such as Marlon Brando’s *On the Waterfront* (1952) and Demi Moore’s *Ghost* (1990) to teach American English. Meng Xiaojun holds mock visa application interviews, drawing on his own experience of successful visa applications to the United States.

“New Dreams” is not merely the name of the school; it describes the dreams shared by the teachers/entrepreneurs and their students. It seems appropriate to call the school a “factory of souls” because the entire curriculum is designed to teach students to become, in Meng Xiaojun’s words, “realistic, self-confident, practical, reasonable”. This aim is revealed in one of Meng’s visa application mock interviews:

Why do you think your girlfriend was responsible for the failure of your visa application?

She broke my heart. She ended our relationship only a month after arriving in the United States.

Very good. She didn't lie to you. She could have broken up with you a year later. Back to the visa application. From the responses on your form, they probably expected you to immigrate.

Why would I immigrate? I wouldn't even if I were given the opportunity. No matter what I said, they didn't believe me.

If you didn't want to immigrate, why did you state on the application form that your reason for going to the United States was to increase your earnings?

I was being honest. Everyone knows it's easier to earn money in the United States than in China.

If an applicant expresses the desire to go to the United States for any other reason than education, their visa application will be denied. You weren't prepared for this. The rejection of your visa application shows that you don't understand the United States. Blaming it on your girlfriend shows that you don't understand woman. Fundamentally, you don't understand yourself. Now, go and revise your application form. ①

This conversation undoubtedly helps the student to improve his visa application. It is a good example of the cross-cultural training provided at New Dreams. However, Meng also regards the failure of the student's application as an indicator of a fundamental need to understand and improve himself.

This pedagogy of the self is central to *American Dreams in China*. The New Dreams teachers seek to empower their students to deal with setbacks and failures in their life projects (such as the failure of a visa application). Cheng Dongqing has mastered the art of failure. He turns loss into an opportunity for gain by treating the pessimism associated with failure as a lesson in optimism. In a passionate speech about the nature of dreams (*mengxiang*), he first points out that failure is inevitable when pursuing a dream. He cites his own experience: "I've never had a dream. I don't even understand what a dream is. I only know what failure is. I can't speak on other topics. When speaking of failure, I don't need a script." Next, he shows statistically that Chinese students commonly fail their exams:

① This is my translation.

Chinese students fail more often than students in other countries because they face the cruelest exams in the world. According to admission rates published by the Ministry of Education, 44.1% of Chinese middle-school students gained places in high school in 1993. This means that nearly 6 million failed. Only 39.9% high-school students went on to college; 1.4 million failed their college entrance exams. Only one in four of our New Dreams students preparing for the Test of English as a Foreign Language and the Graduate Record Examination have earned American scholarships. Another 30,000 have failed.

In his speech, Cheng seeks to establish that “failure is everywhere, and despair is intrinsic to life”, before asking what we should do to address this situation. Finally, he uses drowning as an analogy to illustrate his argument that hope can be found in despair:

Having fallen in water, one does not necessarily die by drowning. Death by drowning only occurs if one remains in the water without swimming; swimming forward without stopping. Those who choose to avoid failure by giving up fail at the very beginning. Failure is not terrible; being afraid of failing is terrible. We can only seek victory in failure. In despair, we must seek hope.

In short, the “new dreams” manufactured at Cheng’s school are not simply dreams of passing English tests and obtaining American visas. The students are also taught to deal with failures and setbacks in their life projects, thereby developing an individualised ethics of utilitarian cosmopolitanism.

In ethical cinema, therefore, the disappearing factory is an important site for the production of the meaning of a community, whether shaped by the *danwei* system or by China’s new knowledge-based economic model. Ethical cinema uses moral education to connect everyday lives and individual histories with the ethos of a community. The work of cinema—not only its production, distribution and exhibition, but also its narrative form (with its own cinematic time)—echoes the work of a community; both are ethically oriented. The temporal fabric of a cinematically narrated factory (narrative

time) parallels the temporal fabric of its cinematic medium (narration time).

IV. Representational Cinema

The treatment of the disappearing factory in representational cinema is determined by genre. In the following, I discuss two artists who use multiple genres simultaneously. I argue that genre is taken very seriously by the creators of representational cinema, and that an epistemological distance is usually maintained between the temporal fabric of a narrated factory and the temporal fabric of representational cinema. The representational filmmaker maintains a critical distance from factory workers and their communities by constructing a division of labour between those who know and those who do not know, even when addressing the precariousness of industrial work. Representational cinema produces a sociological account of the factory as a repressive space. Labour is connected with discipline and power, exploitation and repression. The poor, the underdeveloped and the less well educated are represented as inevitably subject to exploitation. They do nothing but labour to feed themselves; they have no leisure activities. The list of similar assumptions goes on and on.

Jennifer Baichwal's *Manufactured Landscapes* (2006) documents the observations made by the Canadian photographer Edward Burtynsky on the transformation of China's landscape by industrial development and manufacturing. The 90-minute film follows Burtynsky's production of artistic photos of factories, welding sites and recycling centres. The film is constructed in two media; motion pictures (Baichwal's film) and still pictures (Burtynsky's photographs). Each technique illustrates different qualities of the sites documented. In addition to recording Burtynsky's photographic work, the film represents human-made landscapes and human subjects within these landscapes. The film begins with a 9-minute shot of long assembly lines in a gigantic factory space. The camera moves from one end of the workshop to the other without interruption; the workers continue to work as though unaware of the presence of the film crew. Manohla Dargis made the following observations in a review of the film;

Scores of anonymous workers become specks of canary yellow and blots of

bubble-gum pink, a pointillist population. The angles of their bowed heads and raised arms, carefully arranged before assembly lines, are just some of the decorative, precise formal elements. Note how those angles dovetail with those of the machinery. (Dargis, 2007)

The assembly-line scene creates a visual division of labour between the filmmaker/photographer and the workers; between cinematic work and the labour involved in manufacturing.

Burtynsky's colour photographs are all glossy, large-format and generally long-view. Ironically, although Burtynsky appears to highlight the negative effects of technology on nature, his photographs submit the human form to the technological sublime. According to Dargis (2007), Burtynsky's work "tends to subordinate the human form to the harmonious use of color, the balance of graphical forms and the overwhelming man-made and man-ravaged environments". Burtynsky attempts to master the "second nature" created from the human form by industrial development in China.

The use of two media—moving pictures and still photographs—reinforces the division between the filmmaker/photographer and the workers, and the division between cinema and its subjects. Approximately 15 minutes of the film are dedicated to an unnamed factory in Shenzhen. The audience sees only Chinese and English characters/words on an external wall of the factory workshop: *Shijie Gongchang* (The Factory of the World) and *Shijie Tonglu* (The Channel of the World). Nothing could be more stereotypical than these descriptions of China as the world's factory. The long shot of workers and assembly lines contributes to the representation of the factory as highly disciplined and labour intensive. The lack of temporal specificity may be justified, as many viewers are likely to remember consuming China-made products. Nevertheless, the lack of temporal specification compromises the film as both a historical record and a representation by directly reinforcing the timeless Orientalist stereotype of China as the world's factory.

Jia Zhangke's 2008 film *24 City* (*Ershisi Cheng Ji*) is more complicated than merely an example of representational cinema, as it combines aspects of the ethical with the representational. The film depicts the transformation of Factory 420, one of the largest state-owned factories in the city of Chengdu,

since its establishment. The factory, also known as Chengdu Engine (Group) Co., Ltd, was established in 1958 to produce aviation engines for China's air force. It was originally managed by the State Commission of Science and Technology for the National Defence Industry, and is now managed by China Aviation Industry Corporation II. As part of Mao Zedong's initiative to develop China's "third front" (*sanxian*), approximately 4,000 workers at Factory 111 in Shenyang were relocated to Chengdu to found Factory 420. With reduced demand from the Chinese military during the 1990s, the production efforts of Factory 420 were redirected to nonmilitary areas. Consequently, many workers were laid off. In the mid-2000s, in response to Chengdu's rapid expansion, the municipal government decided to relocate all of the city's factories to distant suburban areas. At around the same time, the land occupied by the factory (559,883 square metres) was acquired by China Resources Land Chengdu (established in 2000 as a subsidiary of the Hong Kong-based, Chinese state owned China Resources) for 2.14 billion yuan. The land was used as a site for residential and commercial real estate development.

"24 City" is not only the title of Jia Zhangke's film but also the name of a real-estate project. China Resources Land, one of Jia's three financial sponsors, invested in the film for two main reasons: to use the popularity of cinema to increase the value of the 24 City real-estate project, and to characterise the project as respectful of history and humanity. In short, the company treated the film as a major selling point for its new real-estate project. Apart from sharing the film's name, the real-estate project is depicted in various scenes of the film. A reporter at Chengdu Television Station first announces China Resources' acquisition of the land owned by the former factory. After the factory's machinery has been disassembled and loaded into trucks for removal, signs reading "China Resources Land 24 City" are placed at the main entrance to the factory. One of the interviews depicted in the film takes place in the China Resources sales centre against the backdrop of models of residential buildings. The film's representation of the factory site as a new real-estate project is generally implicit; the acquisition of the site is treated as a natural consequence of historical development. The

disappearance of Factory 420 marks the beginning of 24 City, a middle-class real-estate project. (For more information on the history of the factory, see Ren, 2012)

Jia Zhangke is well known for his ethical approach to filmmaking. He tends to focus on the changes to Chinese society and the everyday lives of Chinese people. The social realism of his films is often shaped directly by his own experiences of life in China. Before *24 City*, Jia considered making a film about state-owned factories and the experiences of factory workers during China's transition from a planned economy to a market economy. In approximately 2000, when Wang Bing began to produce *Tiexi Qu*, Jia wrote a script entitled "The Factory's Gate" (*Gongchang de Damen*), in which he reflected on the hardships faced by laid-off workers. The script describes the experiences of two young people apprenticed to the same "skilled worker" (*shifu*) at a Chinese factory. They become model workers and fall in love with their respective partners in the same year. At approximately the same time, each couple has a child. Later, both workers are laid off in the same year, and spend their newly free time together playing mahjong (*majiang*) and drinking. Eventually, as their children grow up, they decide to enter into business together. Over time, the two previously harmonious families begin to experience conflict, mainly due to financial difficulties. Although the story recounted in Jia's script is common to Chinese experience, it does indicate Jia's early engagement with social issues through cinema. The making of *24 City* was both a continuation and an extension of this process, as the setting enabled Jia to ground his story in specific details of historical time and place.

The focus of *24 City* is the transformation of Factory 420 into a major real estate development site. The film has two main themes: the changes undergone by China's state-owned factory system, and the memories of these changes recounted by workers and their families. The story is told through the experiences of nine characters, comprising five affiliates of the factory and four fictional characters. The latter are played by professional actors. Jia sought to balance two key insights that emerged from his research for the film. When the workers first decided to work in China's factory system, they were, in Jia's words, "very idealistic and pure. Moreover, they trusted the

system and thought of it as an alternative means for transforming China, remaking human beings, and bringing individual happiness” (Ren, 2012, p. 237). However, ordinary workers and their families suffered, struggled and made sacrifices during the transformation of the factory system. Jia’s term “subjective music” (*zhuguan de yinyue*) represents the movement from collective everyday life to individual everyday lives. The use of a symphony by Yoshihiro Hanno in the first half of the film expresses “feelings that are regularized, collectivized” (*youguize de, jitihua de ganjue*). In contrast, the later use of Lim Giong’s free-form electronic music conveys individual sentiments.

The above observations suggest that *24 City* might usefully be treated as an example of ethical cinema. Like *Tiexi Qu*, *24 City* is a historical record of a community associated with a disappearing factory. STBX Like Wang Bing, Jia Zhangke establishes a close relationship in his film between cinematic practice and the ethos of a community. However, I argue that *24 City* is an example more of representational cinema than of ethical cinema. *Tiexi Qu* and *24 City* offer very different answers to the question “What does the picture want?” As previously mentioned, the two young men depicted in *Tiexi Qu* want nothing from the future. In contrast, the subjects in *24 City* want to go to the “outside world” (*waimian de shijie*). Like the young men in *Tiexi Qu*, two of the younger characters in *24 City*—Zhao Gang (a worker’s son who works as a television host) and Su Na (a cadre’s daughter who works for wealthy housewives; played by Zhao Tao, a professional actress)—see no future in factory work. However, they identify possible futures outside Factory 420; beyond what Jia calls a “locked China” (*bei suo qilai de Zhongguo*). Zhao Gang and Su Na are more stably located within Chinese society than Hou Lijun, a worker and worker’s daughter who has been laid off from Factory 420. During an interview on a bus, Hou tells two poignant stories. In the first, she describes her mother’s trip to Shenyang to visit her own parents (Hou’s grandparents) for the first time since relocating to Chengdu 15 years earlier. The second and more important story concerns Hou’s own difficulties in finding a job and making a living after being laid off in 1994. Compared with Zhao Gang and Su Na, Hou is clearly the vulnerable

subject in Jia's film. Indeed, all three characters occupy the expected roles within society. In addition, although Zhao, Su and Hou are linked by their ties to Factory 420, they do not share a coherent sense of community associated with working in the factory. Instead, they are depicted as conducting individual lives in modern China.

V. Aesthetic Cinema

Many filmmakers have found rich material in the decline and closure of state-owned factories in northeastern China. The subject of Zhang Meng's *The Piano in a Factory* (*Gang de Qin*, 2011), like that of Wang Bing's *Tiexi Qu*, is a disappearing factory in Liaoning Province. The main character in Zhang's film is Chen Guilin, a middle-aged worker initially employed at a state-owned steel foundry. Chen and his wife are laid off from the same factory at approximately the same time. As Chen plays the accordion, he forms a performance troupe with his fellow laid-off workers. They make a living by entertaining guests at funerals and sales events sponsored by department stores. Chen's wife leaves him for a businessman, leading to a bitter dispute over the custody of their elementary-school daughter, who loves to play the piano. As Chen cannot afford to buy a piano, he and his friends try to steal one from a local school, but are caught. Chen even draws a piano keyboard on a wooden board to enable his daughter to practise between lessons. Eventually, Chen and his friends are pressured by his daughter to return to the abandoned foundry to make an "iron piano" (*gang de qin*).

Two main themes characterise *The Piano in a Factory* as aesthetic cinema. Both involve the laid-off workers' relationships with the disappearing factory—their efforts to preserve the factory smokestacks, and their appropriation of an abandoned factory space. Arguably, the factory from which the workers were laid off is the main cause of their hardship and humiliation. Once proud members of the working class, who enjoyed all of the benefits of employment in a state-owned factory, now lead precarious and vulnerable lives as members of the lumpenproletariat (entertainers, petty thieves, gang members, gamblers and butchers). As a result of this change in status, one might expect the workers to rebel against the system and erase all

of the symbols of the factory. The fate of the smokestack, an icon of the factory, is conventionally and legislatively determined. When the factory was in operation, the smokestack was a visually prominent symbol of industrial development. After the factory closed down and the whole factory system was abandoned, the smokestack was expected to disappear, becoming lost to imagination.

However, the laid-off workers try to preserve some symbols of the disappearing factory, such as the factory's two giant smokestacks. After several failed attempts, they gather to watch the demolition of the smokestacks. Are they nostalgic for their former lives as factory workers? Do they simply wish to bury their grief in the dust clouds created by the demolition? The film answers neither question; instead, the audience's attention is directed to the possibility of appropriating the abandoned factory space. The factory's gates open, and Shuxian (Chen's girlfriend) walks inside. She is greeted with a performance by Chen of the music for "Rowan Tree" (*Shanzhashu*), a famous song written by E. Rogygin and N. Philipenko in 1953, and imported from the Soviet Union during China's efforts to adopt the Soviet model of industrial development. Originally entitled "Ural Rowan Tree" (*Ural'skaya Ryabinushka*), the Russian song describes the difficulties faced by a female worker in choosing between two co-workers whom she loves. The use of this music in *The Piano in a Factory* to convey the intimacy of the two main characters is striking, particularly against the backdrop of the abandoned factory. The music invites the audience to reconsider the recent disappearance of factory space in China. Many young people in China today choose to have formal wedding photos taken in redeveloped or gentrified industrial spaces (such as factory buildings containing industrial machinery in the 798 Art Zone in Beijing and Eastern Suburb Memory in Chengdu). They wish to create a nostalgic sense of distance from the industrial past, and in so doing, fashion themselves as modern. In *The Piano in a Factory*, however, the music transforms the abandoned factory into a live and animated space that is both public and intimate. Shuxian and Chen's decision to marry in this space marks a break from the industrial past, which is also their own past, enabling them to begin

a new life together. However, unlike the three friends in *American Dreams in China*, who become entrepreneurs, Shuxian and Chen maintain an intimate relationship with the industrial space. As a result, their lives remain bound up with the values of the disappearing industrial past.

Central to the reappropriation of the factory space by Chen and his friends is their construction of an iron piano. In making and assembling the piano's components, these members of the lumpenproletariat demonstrate the skills, knowledge and teamwork acquired during their time at the factory. The construction of the piano is treated as a festive event, marked in particular by the use of music. In contrast with the earlier use of Russian music, which evoked the history of planned economy especially relevant to the location of the story (northeastern China), this scene is accompanied by a piece of Spanish music known in China as "Spanish Bull-Fighter March Music" (*Xibanya Douniushi Jinxingqu*). Originally entitled "España Cañi" (literally "Gypsy Spain"; also known as the "Spanish Gypsy Dance"), this fast-paced, double-step music was written by Pascual Marquina Narro in around 1921, and is usually performed by female musicians. While the band plays the music, Shuxian leads Chen and his friends in a dance. Unlike the sweet and gentle music of "Rowan Tree", which unfolds events slowly in the manner of a cinematographic long-take, "España Cañi" increases the pace of the film. The music turns the tedious work of constructing the piano into a spectacular celebration. The end of the music coincides with the completion of the iron piano, ready to be presented to Chen's daughter.

The iron piano is both a literal present, an object given as a gift and an expression of the temporal present. (Derrida, 1994) Although the iron piano is not a conventional musical instrument, it does represent Chen's love for his daughter. In receiving Chen's present, his daughter also gains a sense of present time as externally determined by an uncertain and unpredictable future. Chen and his friends calmly watch his daughter interact with the machine while anticipating an uncertain future. This is an example of future anteriority. Therefore, the iron piano renders the unthinkable intelligible by mediating between the impractical and the affective and between the future and the past.

As illustrated in *The Piano in a Factory*, aesthetic cinema constructs modes of aesthetic experience rather than “art” *per se*. In contrast with ethical cinema—which focuses on the ethos of a life well lived—and representational cinema—which reflects contemporary society—aesthetic cinema engages with the various possibilities and potentialities of aesthetic experience. It challenges and disrupts certain normative divisions within society. In *The Piano in a Factory*, Chen and his friends neither engage in the expected activities nor occupy the expected roles of laid-off workers. Rather than labouring solely to achieve the practical necessities of life, they fight for the impossible, which lies outside the reach of what Giorgio Agamben calls “bare life” (1998). They do not accept the role of vulnerable subjects, but claim the right to sensible experiences (such as affect, pleasure and leisure) that are not conventionally regarded as available to precarious social subjects. Aesthetic cinema renders intelligible the previously unthinkable subject of the modern disappearing factory.

VI. Conclusion

The three types of cinema explored here all address the transformation of the Chinese economy from the made in China model to the created in China model. However, their approaches are very different. Ethical cinema responds to the change from inside; the filmmaker adopts the ethical position of a member of the threatened community. The disappearing factory becomes a subject of ethical education. In *Tiexi Qu*, Wang Bing’s exploration of the ethics of working subjects engages directly with the dismantling of the state-owned industrial *danwei* system. In *American Dreams in China*, Peter Chan captures the ethics of the DIY way of life in today’s China. His approach to moral education is rooted in the decline of China’s state-owned factory system. Despite adopting different ethical standpoints, both *Tiexi Qu* and *American Dreams in China* are examples of ethical cinema.

Unlike ethical cinema, representational cinema addresses the movement from the made in China model to the created in China model at a distance. Jennifer Baichwal’s *Manufactured Landscapes* and Jia Zhangke’s *24 City* offer useful examples. Baichwal’s documentary captures the human and

environmental atrocities of factory labour in the made in China era. The film is structured by a clear division between the filmmaker as artist and the Chinese worker as labourer; that is, between creative and manual work. In contrast, Jia's film focuses explicitly on the transformation of a particular factory. The workers are not anonymous. However, although the filmmaker gives individual voices to the workers, the film as a whole is fairly predictable in its presentation of the workers as suffering and precarious subjects, similar to those in *Manufactured Landscapes*. In addition, the strategic use of the documentary genre adds value to the films by emphasising their contribution to ethnographic knowledge of China's disappearing factories.

In aesthetic cinema, industrial transformation is addressed from neither the inside nor the outside. Aesthetic cinema neither establishes a hierarchy of artistic forms nor differentiates artworks by their social or economic value. Instead, the creators of aesthetic cinema produce models of aesthetic experience that are irreducible to conventions and norms. In Zhang Meng's *The Piano in a Factory*, for example, an abandoned factory space is reappropriated as a site of creation. This new creative space is aesthetic precisely because it is not reducible to social norms. The laid-off workers depicted in this film depart from expectations of their behaviour and roles as vulnerable members of society. They seek pleasure, pursue intimacy and demand the impossible. As exemplified in *The Piano in a Factory*, aesthetic cinema makes (precarious) subjects real and intelligent. It encourages us to rethink the role of the aesthetic in artistic practices in today's globalised era.

References:

- Agamben, G. (1998). *Homo Sacer: Sovereign power and bare life* (D. Heller-Roazen, Trans). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Baichwal, J. (2006). *Manufactured landscapes*. DVD. New York, NY: Zeitgeist Films.
- Bishop, C. (2012). *Artificial hells: Participatory art and the politics of spectatorship*. London, UK: Verso.
- Chan, P. (2013). *American dreams in China (Zhongguo hehuoren)*. DVD. Hong Kong, CHN: Edko Film.
- Condry, I. (2013). *The soul of anime: Collaborative creativity and Japan's media success story*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

- D'Alessandro, S., & Draguet, M. (2013). *Magritte: The mystery of the ordinary, 1926—1938*. New York, NY: The Museum of Modern Art.
- Dargis, M. (2007). Industrial China's ravaging of nature, made disturbingly sublime. *The New York Times*. June 20, 2007.
- Davis, O. (2010). *Jacques Rancière*. London, UK: Polity.
- Derrida, J. (1994). *Given time; 1. counterfeit money* (P. Kamuf, Trans.). Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Finkelppearl, T. (2013). *What we made: Conversations on art and social cooperation*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Hewison, R. (2014). *Cultural capital: The rise and fall of creative Britain*. London, UK: Verso.
- Jia, Z. (2008). *24 City (Ershisi Cheng ji)*. DVD. Paris, FRA: MK2.
- Lash, S. & Lury, C. (2007). *Global culture industry: The mediation of things*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.
- Lee, C. K. (2007). *Against the law: Labor protests in China's rustbelt and sunbelt*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Lü, X. (2007). *Tiexi qu; lishi yu jieji yishi (Tiexi qu; History and class consciousness)*. Retrieved from <http://sh.sina.com.cn/20070615/120777741.shtml>.
- Mitchell, W. J. T. (2005). *What do pictures want?* Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Pang, L. (2012). *Creativity and its discontents: China's creative industries and intellectual property rights offenses*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Plato (2011). *The republic* (B. Jowett, Trans.). New York, NY: Simon & Brown.
- Rancière, J. (2009 [2004]). *Aesthetics and its discontents* (S. Corcoran, Trans.). London, UK: Polity.
- Rancière, J. (2010). *Dissensus: On politics and aesthetics* (S. Corcoran, Ed. & Trans.). London, UK: Continuum.
- Rancière, J. (2013 [2011]). *Aisthesis: Scenes from the aesthetic regime of art* (Z. Paul, Trans.). London, UK: Verso.
- Ren, H. (2012). Redistribution of the sensible in neoliberal China. In B. Wang, & J. Lu (Eds.), *China and new left visions: Political and cultural interventions*. Boulder, CO: Lexington Books
- Ren, H. (2013). *The middle class in neoliberal China: Governing risk, life-building, and themed spaces*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Roberts, J. (2007). *The intangibilities of form: Skill and deskilling in art after the readymade*. London, UK: Verso.

- Rockhill, G. , & Watts, P. (2009). Jacques Rancière: Thinker of dissensus. In G. Rockhill, G. , & and Watts, P. (Eds.), *Jacques Rancière: History, politics, aesthetics*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Smith, J. E. , & Weisser, A. (Eds.). (2011). *Everything is in everything: Jacques Rancière between intellectual emancipation and aesthetic education*. Pasadena, CA: Art Center Graduate Press.
- Voci, P. (2010). *China on video: Smaller-screen realities*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Wang, B. (2002). *Tiexi qu: West of the tracks*. DVD. Paris, FRA: MK2.
- Wong, W. W. Y. (2014). *Van Gogh on demand: China and the readymade*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Xing, C. (2010). *Made in China (Zhongguo zhizao)*. Retrieved from http://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XMTUxNTMxMTUy.html.
- Zhang, M. (2011). *The piano in a factory (Gang de qin)*. DVD. New York, NY: Film Movement.

Author:

Ren Hai, associate professor of East Asian Studies, Anthropology, and Gender and Women's Studies at the University of Arizona, Tucson. His research interests include comparative popular culture and media studies, visual culture, the digital humanities, urban studies, contemporary art and aesthetics, and political philosophy.

作者简介:

任海, 美国亚利桑那大学东亚研究、人类学、性别与女性研究副教授。研究领域包括比较文化与媒体研究、视觉文化、数字人文、城市研究、当代艺术与美学, 政治哲学。

Email: hren@email.arizona.edu