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From *China* to CK2K2X:

The Camouflage of Imagination and The Emergence of The Heterodox

Juntao Yang

Exhibition Review: Cheng Ran Solo Exhibition "CK2K2X"

BY ART MATTERS, Hangzhou, 2022

The overseas screening of *China* (1972) unexpectedly triggered extensive debates among critics from both China and Italy, with the question of how to categorize the images becoming the core of controversy. Faced with considerable negative criticism, Antonioni insisted that "I did not persist in seeking an imaginary China, but rather surrendered myself to the reality I could see—I believe I did the right thing." However, the question remains whether such a statement is truly effective, whether Antonioni's own imagination of China is truly untraceable in his incomplete and brief fieldwork, and whether the restricted itinerary and carefully crafted landscapes might instead have aroused a certain rebellious desire. The topics this question extends to include: to what extent can we and our produced moving images claim to exclude the invasion of imagination; how the gaps between frames, the connections between actions, and the succession and separation of segments can be considered as tending toward the former through what mode of examination within the dichotomy of reality and imagination.



Antonioni, *China*, 1972, sound film, 220 minutes

It is necessary to note that we face a question mediated by Spivak: *Can the subaltern speak?* This is also a point repeatedly mentioned by Ziauddin Sardar—in imaginations about the Orient (often Orientalist), Oriental peoples are always deliberately constructed as silent and docile groups, with predetermined collective imaginations imposed upon living bodies and continuously self-reinforced and infinitely reproduced. The imagination/image in representation, as Daniel-Henri Pageaux puts it, serves as "a present component that displaces an absent prototype (the foreign), substitutes for it, and also displaces a mixture of emotions and thoughts." Antonioni's documentary, with its somewhat detached yet forceful narration, points to the silence of local residents. Real China is inevitably occupied by imagination, unfortunately emulating what Orientalism excels at: mastering the Orient that is difficult and should not be *reduced* through description and representation, viewing it as a *variant* of the West that is both intimate and distant, reflecting back on the West itself.

However, what cannot be overlooked is that those attempting to impose silence include not only Antonioni's lyrical poet-like, inevitably male narcissistic Oriental imagination (like his obsessive yellow rivers, blue deserts, streets paved with salt), but also, naturally, official political intentions—through detailed planning and proper arrangements, exquisitely made-up

children, students singing songs of praise, patients using acupuncture anesthesia, these images are presented before Antonioni's lens in carefully prepared performative postures. Another imagination not originating from the West desperately wants to replace a certain reality, attempting to squeeze into the camera's frame in the form of a dictatorship of happiness—the *dictatorship of happiness* as a basic strategy of the official representation system has continued well into the new millennium. The friction between Antonioni and Chinese officials over filming thus presents itself as a competition between two imaginations.

In previous critical writings, commentators often cite the discourse of another Italian literary figure who once visited China, Alberto Moravia, who claimed that "Antonioni's lens shows us this enormous country's here and now, as if China had always been this way, that is to say, ultimately it is merely a pure object for description, requiring neither establishing relationships with it nor investigating its own relationships with the world's past and present... Antonioni's China is an 'everyday' China; his China is based not on a realist ideal but on the 'everydayness' of reality." This statement has been considered a theoretically acute commendation of Antonioni's rejection of the "essential truth" of political propaganda (in Wang Xiaolu's terms), moving toward the "representative truth" of *direct cinema*: this means that meticulous attention to daily life dissolves a kind of arrogant desire for forceful control, ideology is shattered by the powerful invasion of pure objects, and historiography in Stuart Hall's sense (the overall pattern of grand narrative) is conquered by vibrant voyeurism and freely growing life.

But is imagination completely suppressed here? Indeed, as Alberto Moravia perceived, Antonioni's China can be called "everyday China," which to some extent refuses the intervention of performance and packaging (although Antonioni was not entirely opposed to the importance of staging for revealing truth). However, this *everydayness* is not a dissolution but a conscious representation of another construction/imagination. Wherever binary oppositions appear, ideological imagination is already operating at a deep level: "everyday China" and even "nostalgic China" are created by Antonioni's images as the opposite of "revolutionary China" and "modern China." Those grand things viewed by officials as great achievements (modernized internationalist architecture, well-ordered factories and their

worker communities, advanced tractors and lathes) are moved outside the camera's frame, with only individual life actions and unconsciously revealed expressions being recalled, and although the latter does not hesitate to resort to candid photography to achieve manifestation, the realist principle that Moravia spoke of is indeed lost in preferences and selections.

Antonioni's Chinese imagination resides in an anti-modernization alternative liberation (in this regard, exactly like the contradiction of *Red Desert*, which strove to show the crushing of humanity by large machinery). This liberation differs from everything happening on Chinese soil; it is excessively self-limited to scenarios (sometimes even pre-modern) that revolutionary modernity has not yet reached—if there indeed exists some sense of *truth* or *authenticity*, then *China* most likely represents the unevenness discovered when imagination collides with authenticity.



Antonioni, *China*, 1972, sound film, 220 minutes

The means by which Antonioni's documentary handles imagination can be roughly summarized in two directions: one is mapping based on *(anti-)political topography*, the other is narrating based on *(anti-)modernity historiography*. The former implies vast, comprehensive, ambitious landscape representation, attempting to redraw a context of Chinese political imagination and political display through potential rebellion against the already established filming route—the political display route (Beijing-Suzhou-Nanjing-

Shanghai) is disrupted by Antonioni's deliberate insertion of Linxian County in Henan, with suddenly intruding and startled rural indigenous people covering performative deliberateness. The topography of *China* continues an axis existing in Antonioni's personal art history: the reaction against "legitimized, ideological, continuous, logical space," which here manifests as a rejection of what Sontag calls "the moral order of space." Close-ups of clothing corners, hair strands, and expressions replace the political order that official occasions should require, dissolving revolutionary seriousness and solemnity with everydayness. Underground free markets, boatmen rowing boats, and scenes of using the toilet similarly signify displays different from clichés—clichés in Western contexts (which also means negative in French) may very well mean correct in socialist China.

Narratology in this documentary is the powerful invasion of voice-over, which does not describe (or systematize) in an orderly and dignified manner but becomes disordered, wandering, and casual, flowing between historical nostalgia and commentary of unclear stance, sometimes mixed with male-centered sexualization and Western-centered essentialization. By attending to those historical remnants excluded by revolutionary modernity and adding restrained lyricism, it becomes an outlaw from the norm of "singular, ideal observer," resisting the consistency of a certain "grand monologue" (though itself becoming a kind of grand monologue). Although Antonioni's Oriental imagination indeed remains significantly in his lyrical epic-like images, as Lisa Lowe says, simply viewing "Oriental representation" as "entirely an expression of European colonialism"—"this totalitarian logic would suppress the possibility of heterogeneous logics." Cohen-Vrignaud points out that Oriental imagination still has "aesthetic and rhetorical functions that weaken imperial rule—it can emotionally alienate people from rulers, triggering mass resistance to oppressive tax policies, brutal punishments, police repression, and sexual control." Here, a series of more thought-provoking questions surface: Does Antonioni's Chinese imagination serve other purposes? Are what is excluded and what is presented still open to debate? Must the function of imagination still rely on viewing and reception, thereby presenting various heterogeneities? How can we support and create a beneficial imagination to construct a path to community in the no-longer-pure contemporary context?



Cheng Ran, *CK2K2X*, 2017-2022, sound film, 65 minutes

About forty-five years after Antonioni's filming of *China*, video artist Cheng Ran, inspired by it, created the documentary *CK2K2X* (this name also refers to contemporary China). In Cheng Ran's view, Antonioni's documentary is "simple and improvisational" yet entirely a "nation from a personal perspective." For this, the artist captures fragmented images from journeys, out-of-control expansion of improvisational and random generation, and through this method demonstrates another possibility of transforming "imagination," although different individuals' or collectives' "imagined worlds must necessarily be completely different." Beyond the random montage of spectacles, Cheng Ran's use of sound excludes the coerciveness of voice-over and its sometimes unavoidable essentialization. Delirious prose or poetry replaces commentary or explanation, and atmospheric music tending toward the dreamlike or hyper-industrial unifies various real landscapes and fictional understandings of this land in a gentle rather than coercive manner. The *China*-style imagination is reversed in

Cheng Ran's work—the "man with a movie camera" in the former's consciousness is no longer an objective gatherer trying to bring clear knowledge about China or Chinese people; what the latter does is dissolve and dismantle the inherent identity/cognition of "China"/"Chinese people" and return it to hundreds of scattered and unconnected "data caches."

Cheng Ran's work originates from his residency in Amsterdam and subsequent touring commissioned by *BY ART MATTERS* (note that itself is an extremely internationalized art system), meaning that although Cheng Ran is by no means a Western director, he has to some degree been touched by Western elements. On the other hand, as a Han artist who grew up in Inner Mongolia and studied and worked in Hangzhou, Cheng Ran's local identity becomes increasingly unstable due to his frontier background, long-term sojourning, and history of overseas exchanges. The author does not intend to sort out the authorial elements in his work by appealing to his personal art history, but rather attempts to awaken imagination about another possibility, as Sardar describes: "Neither the West nor the East are homogeneous totalitarian entities; both are complex, ambiguous, and heterogeneous." Said confessed the same idea: "All (cultures) are hybrid, heterogeneous, extremely different rather than monolithic," or as Homi K. Bhabha puts it, a cultural hybrid. To a large extent, the long-standing and stable constructed binary opposition of Orient/Occident is approaching extinction. More complex and unstable identities are being constantly perceived due to the time-space compression brought by globalization, and another imagination different from Orientalism (although sometimes using Orientalist reactive paradigms) may be waiting for an opportunity.



Cheng Ran, *CK2K2X*, 2017-2022, sound film, 65 minutes

How to achieve the "resistance and expulsion" of Orientalist imagination that Sardar calls for—in other words, in the self-proliferation of spectacle brought by neoliberal globalization, how to correct those essentialist/realist traditions universally existing in collective unconsciousness, retrieving a "conscious openness" to truly create a "pluralistic future of mutual understanding"? Faced with this urgent issue about imagination, Cheng Ran's video practice may provide some answer. We must rely on wandering steps and roving perspectives to slightly leverage the tightly established system—this is the inevitable resurrection of Benjamin's flâneur in the glocalized landscape; or resort to low whispers, prostrate and detached observation, embodied experience, making the enormously grand statements and imaginations break and shatter, to regain something smaller, more portable, falling into soft haptic experience due to losing inflated edges—imagination here does not move toward dissolution due to fragmentation; on the contrary, it becomes an excellent affirmation of the

various entanglements in trans-territorial/gender/species complexity and globality. Between relational experience and dwelling perspective, we regain water-like imagination (think of what kind of Oriental imagination it once became through Bruce Lee's expression!), which can discover the gaps in obstacles and the vulnerable points of barriers with unprecedented tenacity, achieving gentle subversion through subtle transformative ability, ultimately grasping an anti-constructive construction and de-essentialized essence in extreme privacy and delirious hallucination—or rather, allowing us to truly reach *the Other(ness)*.