

QIAN, Ying. 2024.
Revolutionary Becomings:
Documentary Media in
Twentieth-Century China.
 New York: Columbia
 University Press.

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English-language monographs on the topic of Chinese documentary cinema, few and far between just a decade or so ago, now constitute a substantial body of literature, to which Ying Qian's 2024 book, *Revolutionary Becomings*, is a recent and welcome addition. *Revolutionary Becomings* focuses on the history of Chinese documentaries before the advent of independent cinema in the 1990s, shedding light on various productions spanning almost the entire twentieth century. Far from merely providing an overview of Chinese non-fiction film, Ying Qian also intends to "reconsider our approaches not only to documentary and cinema, but to revolution itself" (p. 4). To do so, she posits documentary as an "eventful media" (ibid.), "situated" and "productive" of various social and political outcomes in the context of twentieth-century China (p. 10). Considered as a "revolutionary media," Chinese documentary cinema played the indispensable role of creating "constitutive relationships that do not only connect entities but also change them" (ibid.).

This working hypothesis once established in the introduction, Ying Qian sets out to verify it in various historical contexts. In Chapter One, she examines the role of photography in the complex political and commercial exchanges between Chinese elites and transnational actors at the onset of the twentieth century. She then evaluates the contribution of documentary filmmaking to the ideologically divided 1920s and 1930s Chinese film scene (Chapter Two), turning her gaze to the rise of propaganda documentaries during the era of Sino-Japanese and Civil War in Chapter Three, then to productions made during the Great Leap Forward, in particular a docu-drama hybrid called "artistic documentaries," in Chapter Four. While the book follows a chronological order and each chapter focuses on a specific period, Chapter Five is organised around a specific theme and explores China's image and its relationship to the rest of the world in factual films from the 1950s to the 1970s. A cluster of 1980s productions tasked with examining and correcting past wrongs are then presented in the last chapter, Chapter Six.

Ying Qian's meticulously documented and carefully contextualised film analyses are convincing commentaries on these films. Her explication is particularly compelling in the first three chapters. In Chapter One, the author discusses the revolutionary role of recording (*jilu* 紀錄) in the early twentieth century, and how documentaries were used for fundraising and mobilising efforts to unify China and to respond to external threats. This role is amplified in the subsequent decades as the Chinese film industry becomes more firmly established. Chapter Two examines 1920s and 1930s newsreels, as well as docu-fictions and amateur films and their contribution to "China's left-wing film culture" (p. 62). While Ying Qian discusses two typical examples of left-wing, or "hard" (ying 硬) cinema with *Torrent* (*Kuangliu* 狂流, 1933) and *Spring Silkworm* (*Chuncan* 春蠶, 1933), she also reevaluates Liu Na'ou's 劉吶鷗 travelogues, which belong to the "soft" (*ruan* 軟) cinema category.¹ She holds that the colonial identity of Taiwanese Liu Na'ou and his films' original form give them a revolutionary nature, although it is markedly different from "hard cinema" productions. In the late 1930s, pressing geopolitical issues and more fully-fledged film infrastructures gave rise to the wartime propaganda and solidarity film genres examined in Chapter Three. The author employs visual history to recontextualise the films' production modes in order to assess them in a fairer light – a method that yields productive results, especially for *Long Live the Nation* (*Minzu wansui* 民族萬歲, 1941), and Yan'an productions, as well as when examining Soviet cinema's influence on Chinese documentaries. These films aim at producing a "winning reality" (p. 107), and are in that sense programmatic and, one could say in today's language, motivational. This tendency to depict an idealistic and idealised vision of the present becomes more extreme during the Great Leap Forward examined in Chapter Four. Chinese documentaries of that period are concerned with heralding a vision of the future rather than with recording an enhanced present. The "winning realities" of Chapter Three's documentaries become "winning temporalities" that "created a media ecology of optimism that shunned serious discussions of risk, contingency and failure" (p. 175). Disconnected from present challenges, these films could not register the disastrous famine rearing its head after the Great Leap Forward.

Stepping aside from her chronological exposé, Ying Qian examines in Chapter Five the theme of the "uncertainty of political knowledge" (p. 176) arising from her discussion of the Great Leap Forward documentaries. The author starts by looking at how 1950s Korean War films mapped China's enemies and allies, before examining bourgeois tendencies in 1950s State Studio productions focusing on peacetime pleasures. China's international image with Mao Zedong's visit to the Soviet Union and Liu Shaoqi's 1963 trip to Indonesia are then compared and discussed. Ambitious and stimulating, this chapter's themes are perhaps too varied and wide-ranging for this section, and the film analyses would benefit from longer development. The last chapter, Chapter Six, jumps forward to

1. In the 1930s, Chinese cinema was categorised into "soft" films (usually, entertainment films from KMT-leaning studios and authors) and "hard" films expressing left-wing ideas and worldviews. This dichotomy is still largely in use today in Chinese film historiography, although it has been reevaluated in many publications. See for instance Bao 2015 and Ong 2013.

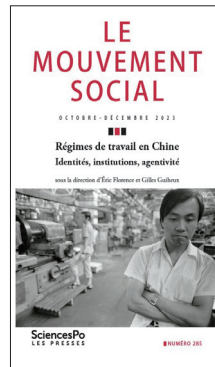
the post-Cultural Revolution and post-Mao eras, and observes a rich body of television documentaries seeking to redress, in the narrow margins of ideological freedom allowed in official channels, the harm inflicted on various groups of people in the past decades. Inevitably, this chapter closes with the six-part television documentary *River Elegy* (1988), which is widely considered a precursor to the historical and social debates leading to the Tiananmen movement, and is cited by some as an inspiration to the handful of early independent documentary filmmakers working in the 1990s and early 2000s.

The epilogue duly references the Chinese independent documentary film movement, yet another “revolutionary” practice that this time, and by contrast with previous productions, “no longer mediate[s] party-people relationships” (p. 250) since independent filmmakers act as individuals and not representatives of the state. With its compelling historical narrative and engagement with the political and social roles of documentary film, Ying Qian’s study will help students and scholars alike navigate the complex and varied body of factual images made in twentieth-century China.

References

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FLORENCE, Éric, and Gilles GUIHEUX (eds.). 2023.

“Labour Regimes in China: Identity, Institutions and Agency.”

Le Mouvement Social 4(285): 3–200.

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This special issue of *Le Mouvement Social*, guest-edited by Éric Florence and Gilles Guiheux, contributes to the expanding body of literature on China’s labour regime, particularly given its publication during a pivotal moment in the country’s history as China faces a slowdown in economic growth and a decline in its working population. Alongside a rich diversity of materials and methodological approaches (surveys, ethnographic fieldworks, interviews, etc.), this issue provides timely, critical, and multidisciplinary insights into the sea-change of Chinese labour over seven decades.

The editorial by Florence and Guiheux effectively sets the stage for the subsequent contributions by providing a concise history of China’s labour regimes since 1949. It also identifies four primary themes serving as analytical lenses for China’s labour regimes in the following chapters: (1) categories for analysing China’s social history, (2) workers’ identity politics, (3) labour institutions, and (4) workers’ agency.

Following the editorial, Claude Chevalyere delves into the field of coercion within early modern Chinese history. Chevalyere critiques historians who have overly focused on the working masses as mere victims of “feudal” exploitation, while neglecting the significant influence of free market dynamics on their domination. By reexamining categories of “labour,” he challenges the uncritical transposition of archival sources by historians, which often leads to vague and quantifiable labour categories obscuring the real (capitalist) relations of production during the Ming and Qing dynasties. Notably, Chevalyere’s analysis of the so-called “Yongzheng emancipation of the ‘mean’ people” (*Yongzheng chu jian wei liang jiefang* 雍正除賤為良解放) in the eighteenth century provides insightful perspectives. This emancipation policy removed the registration of idle people and allowed individuals from certain low-status professions (e.g., musicians and entertainers), Tanka boat people (*dan hu* 蛋戶), and other “mean” people (*jianmin* 賤民) to register as commoners. These changes crucially redefined the status of hired labourers (*gugong* 僱工). Chevalyere’s analysis challenges the notion of a linear