Landscape and Agency
Yellow Earth and the Demon Lover

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In China, the Fifth Generation is the label applied to those film-makers who came to a difficult maturity while the industry was silenced during the Cultural Revolution. Characteristically, their work reflects in a critical but coded way on the traumatic legacy of that time. Perhaps the most famous of these films, and my starting point, is Yellow Earth, which in 1984 launched the international career of its director, Chen Kaige. Its disconcerting impact was captured a couple of years later by the Chinese film critic, Li Tuo:

For Chinese film audiences and critics alike, the arrival of Yellow Earth was quite unexpected. It was like a... social gathering where people are awaiting the arrival of a friend: the doorbell rings, the door opens, but the person who steps in is a stranger that no-one recognises... there is an awkward silence. (cited in Barmé, 1986: 253)

My concern here is not to add to the critical literature about Yellow Earth. I am interested in a different question. This concerns the possibility of reading film politically, but without reducing film to a reflection of politics. The real issue, the political importance of art, is the creation of a public imaginary space. In reading the representation of landscape in Chinese painting and cinema, I discern the lineaments and limits of a functional symbolic public sphere, even within a totalitarian society in which the applicability of the concept of civil society may be questionable.

My starting point is Hannah Arendt’s insistence on the engagement of speech and action in the making of a public (Arendt, 1959: 155ff). Action is the human revelation of self through the completion of utterance; that is, the achievement of a doing which incorporates both intention and the communication of that intention and of its completed meaning in the symbolic sphere. It is not quite the same as Habermas’s theory of communicative
action, which, at least in its pristine explication, presupposes an equivalence of articulation and reception which is arguably never possible in a human context. I prefer to define action as communicated, a retrospective qualifier which yet does not necessarily express a sequential passage through time. The action, the communication, the intention, the completed utterance are all part of one another and may be synchronous as well as perfectly symbiotic. Agency is the ability – physical, psychic, structural and (very importantly in the context of film analysis) spatial and symbolic – to take action, in this sense of communicated action.

This definition of action underpins my central concern: is there a symbolic public space that is made visible and available through art and film? Given that both civil society and public space entail certain forms of agency and certain forms of commonality between citizens, is it fruitful to look for a symbolic public space within and between moments of painterly and cinematic utterance? I ask the question in this way in order to underline that I am not seeking to prove that communal and political relations, or political and communal agency, are duplicated in art and film, nor, where they are discernible, that they reflect the state of the place where they were produced. My argument is that there are symbolic echoes and representations of actual experience in these films which allow the viewer a sense of the contemporary mood from which they appeared as cultural productions. To the extent that this mood is communicated the films contain spaces for the invention and expression of a public imaginary. The exercise of an aesthetic agency through artistic or cinematic utterance is one indicator of an operating public space. That is why the painterly or cinematic aesthetic may be seen as a functional symbolic public sphere.

This is not to say that art or cinema is necessarily an institution of civil society. For the Western observer, however, it does raise another question: to what extent do terms like modernity and postmodernity have any salience in trying to understand the Chinese case? I take it for granted that modernity is experienced and imagined in particular ways at different times by people in post-colonial nations (Rowlands, 1995). I also accept Rey Chow’s argument (1993) that subjectivity, especially that of the woman and/or the post-colonial subject, dictates one’s experience of time. For her, the post-colonial subject has always lived in a disjointed, off-centred space analogous to the dominant Western experience of postmodernity. Does this mean we should think of post-Maoist culture as postmodern? Chris Berry apparently thinks so. But, in claiming that post-socialist films like Yellow Earth are also postmodern, he seems to conflate historical periodization with a series of aesthetic and generic changes and departures. This is his view of the ‘scar’ films which appeared in the wake of the Cultural Revolution.

Foregrounding individual memories and... often the differences between them, they simultaneously signify a nostalgia for the communalism constructed through apparatuses such as the modernist socialist history of the past and its death. In so doing, post-socialist scar films are part of a globalized late twentieth-century postmodernism. (Berry, 1995: 87)
This is an interesting reading, but Berry is, in my view, too quick to hive off time and closet it. The death of ‘modernist socialist history’ is obvious and yet the terms of burial are still under negotiation as the current Party leadership in China has too many roots in that past to lose it entirely. Even the cult of Mao Zedong continues to resonate in the 1990s (Benewick and Donald, 1996).

These echoes are more than nostalgia, and they are not necessarily postmodern. ‘Post-socialism’ was Arif Dirlik’s description of an historical and economic shift after Deng’s return to power (Dirlik and Meisner, 1989). ‘Postmodernism’ is an aesthetic term allied roughly with the supposed new era of postmodernity. Both terms are contentious. As Chow’s work indicates, neither need be coterminous with the other, nor need they be assumed to have equal global significance. In discussing Chinese films, emerging from an entirely different ‘modernity’ from most of the rest of the world, and despite China’s current economic status as potential world marketplace, the idea of global postmodernism is too diffuse and imprecise to be helpful.

That is why I start, as it were, at the other end, with particular contemporary configurations of time and space as they appear in the symbolic structures of certain paintings and films. My premise is that the capture of the contemporary in a particular aesthetic moment on screen does not in this case yield up another postmodern hole. The postmodern is characterized as having no metanarrative and no one referent, but as a surface fiction with a multiplicity of reference points across time and space, and perhaps history too. This is not what I perceive in films like Yellow Earth.

Yellow Earth is not, in any case, a conventional scar film. It may even be seen as the film that signalled the end of the genre. It returns to history but it is not nostalgic. It questions the conventions of both the scar film genre and of the entrenched aesthetic form of socialist realism. In particular the film undermines the notions of a larger narrative frame, and of faith in the communal. The very strength of the irony in Yellow Earth makes it quite clear that the referential solidity of earlier films was such that it needed a large hammer to crack it. To a great degree it is the film’s own unsentimental return to the signs and stories of nostalgic politics that renders it such a powerful document of past failure and contemporary unease. In my discussion of its representation of national space, I look to local, national time as the primary source of meaning – although, of course, I am aware that this specificity needs in turn to be set in the context of global time frames.

**Homelands**

In my account of Yellow Earth, I am looking at points of disruption within the text, as they may provide a clue to understanding the social and political imaginary operating in China in the mid-1980s. The possibility of such moments of disruption is dependent on the pre-existence of a public imaginary which can be subverted. For textual disruptions to be effective – or even discernible – there must be visual and narrative conventions already in place. The familiar must be made strange and the strangeness must be
recognizable on its own contemporary terms. And so, in a society where criticism of past and future is led and constrained by the Party, such disruptions allow us to glimpse the structure of that public imaginary. They may then be seen as a moment of public space.

Although here I am looking primarily at the disjunctural representation of space, and especially landscape, this cannot be altogether detached from the question of time. Historicity pervades all modes of Chinese narrative – national, public and political – and even space is invested with meaning through the construction of a narrated relationship with human history. This familiar temporality makes the reception of meaning possible. It solicits the complicity of the audience and so completes the virtual circle of meaning in a closed semiotic system. As I have suggested already, breaks in this circle can only be recognized by those who share a common sense, a contemporary vision. Others, in a different time and a different cultural location, will experience those same breaks as narrative mistakes, as flaws, or as simply meaningless. The structure of public space that is created in the text through these disruptions is thus both powerful as a mark of the new, and invisible to those whose spectatorship does not recognize its provenance.

To illustrate this argument about the importance of space in time, I shall consider the use of topography in Yellow Earth. I should emphasize that my concern is with landscape, shanshui, not countryside, fengjing. The difference is important in both Chinese and English. Landscape is a cultural image, a pictorial way of representing, structuring, or symbolising surroundings (Casgrove and Daniels, 1988). Landscape is not countryside, it cannot be entered, worked, or in any way made ordinary. It is visible only on the level of icon, and those that do enter it themselves become icons, elements of the cultural imaginary, and their meaning is in fixed relation to the meaning of the landscape.

The landscape of Yellow Earth is the mountainous regions of Shaanbei in the province of Shaanxi, which often feature as landscape in this iconic sense in Chinese painting and on film. Its symbolic resonance can be amplified through a comparison with a famous painting from the Maoist era, Shi Lu’s Fighting in Northern Shaanxi (1959). In Shi Lu’s work the intention is quite clearly the inscription of China – a post-1949 Maoist China – into a certain landscape. In Chen’s film the same place is represented, and figures of the same historical period are present. In the painting the figures are recognizable representations of the present transposed on to the past. In the film the figures seem to fit into the past they occupy, but here the landscape itself devours their meaning. The landscape in Yellow Earth reasserts itself, and the meaning of China and its history across 50 years of revolutionary control is up for negotiation and change.

Thus landscape provides not just a backdrop for the drama of history, but becomes part of a process of rewriting, or reinscribing, history. Ann Anagnost (1994) has described how the rewriting, or more accurately the resaying, of personal history, was of central importance to the restructuring
of national memory before and during the establishment of the Communist state in 1949. Cadres worked with peasants to help them articulate the bitterness of their experience as part of a national narrative of oppression and class difference. The random cruelty of fate, ming, was replaced in their speech by the selective crimes of the class enemy, usually the landlord. She notes, however, that the authenticity of the peasant voice, the voice of the subaltern, is not the whole point in this strategy.

If China of imperial times was indeed graphocentric, in preferring the written word as more transparently 'truthful', then what does the privileging of oral performance in the context of revolution suggest? ... Might it not have reflected a metaphysics of presence already inherent in Marxism itself, as one of the master narratives of Western modernity? Might it not have had something to do with the importance of these narratives in the actual process of constituting the class subject – not just in terms of inscribing the subjectivities of the one telling and those listening, but also in terms of creating a socialist realism, in which the different classes cease to be theoretical, but take on an embodied form as the subjects of history in the eyes of the party itself? (Anagnost, 1994: 265)

The very aesthetic of the new age, socialist realism, is defined through the resaying of history, and the subjects of that history are themselves defined by the emergent aesthetic. This circularity, or virtuality, of meaning itself depends on the metanarrative of Marxist class analysis. So class subjects are always aesthetic as well as political. Political legitimacy which relies on a particular configuration of class subjects will be dependent on an aesthetic that can bear the symbolic weight of a complete national self-image. The obvious link between the representation of landscape – 'a pictorial way of representing, structuring, or symbolising surroundings' – and the dominant aesthetic may then be understood as a determining factor in the symbolic structure of a national imaginary.

The centrality of discourse to the establishment and maintenance of a Maoist state has been thoroughly argued in David Apter and Tony Saich's (1994) account of the symbolic importance of Yan'an, the revolutionary base of the Communist Party during the struggle against the Japanese and the Guomindang in the 1930s and 1940s. They describe the systematic taking apart and remaking of individuals through the appropriation of their stories. The narratives of past suffering and present rebirth into the Party project were used to feed a general narrative that was the new truth of universal Chinese experience. This was linked exegetically to Mao's personal history. Mao's life story was told as a progress across China to Yan'an, marking it as his own. 'Mao was central but also disembodied, cosmocratie.' He 'served as a mouthpiece for higher forces (sacred) and truths (secular)' (Apter and Saich, 1994: 114–15). Yan'an was Mao, Mao was Yan'an, and the same principle of borrowed meaning would be stretched across the entire territory of the Chinese state so that Mao and Mao's line were the imagined ideal of the new China.
In Yan’an, storytelling was transformed into something quite different when in the space formed between lapsarian doctrines and dialectical truth the Rectification Campaign began. Its consequences went far beyond ideology or pragmatics to the formation of symbolic capital, with exegetical bonding as a form of discipline, a way of internalising bonds. . . . (Apter and Saich, 1994: 114)

Mao was able to draw on this symbolic power of narrative, this historical aesthetic, to undermine those who dissented from his line. Apter and Saich cite the instance of the so-called ‘twenty-eight Bolsheviks’.

He pooh-poohed their knowledge by drawing from public experience events that could be converted into metonymies for his own ‘universal’ truths. These he elevated to the position of dialectical breaks in historical consciousness, ‘levelling down’, he then manipulated these into metaphorical narratives. This mass line enabled Mao to recast time from history to situation, situation into the particular space of the border areas, and border areas into the simulacrum of Yan’an as a utopic community. Yan’an was made to serve as a moral template, rather than a model, of the China yet to be born. (Apter and Saich, 1994: 115)

**Taking Time and Making Space**

Apter and Saich’s notion of a ‘moral template’ is close to what I call a ‘national imaginary’. In the Chinese case particularly, this template or imaginary has been indelibly marked by the nature and legitimating requirements of ruling groups, whether those of the imperial dynasties or, I argue here, those of a totalitarian Communist regime.

It is the essence of a moral template or national imaginary to be so deeply ingrained in the social and psychological structures that constitute normality, or even reality, as to be invisible. Nevertheless, their features can be glimpsed at moments of disjuncture, whether textual (as I have argued) or historical. It is therefore interesting to look at the transitions between dynasties. The transfer of dynastic power in China has traditionally been marked by the beginning of a new era. Although the 60-year cycle of year names continues, the age in which that cycle turns is regarded as pristine and graced by the Mandate of Heaven. The emphasis on a new beginning relates to what Joseph Needham called the contradictions of ‘human society in time’ (Needham, 1964). He is referring to the conception of a Golden Age which haunts Chinese myth-history. It was an explicit article of faith for Mohists and Daoists, and implicit in the Confucian model of developmental progress as that was read as an exhortation to return to the standards of the golden past. The neo-Confucian pull between regression and development is pertinent to an understanding of both Mao’s manipulation of Chinese history, and of post-Maoist negotiations with the recent past and with tradition. The word for time, shi, means only the specific happening, the moment when something happened, the frame in which shi is placed is entirely a matter for human, official and power-holding hindsight.
The rootedness of this sense of rupture, change and renewal can be seen in the extended transfer of legitimacy and authority from the Ming dynasty to that of the Qing. The art historian Jonathan Hay uses this historical remaking of the national imaginary to analyse the work of what were called ‘remnant painters’, those artists loyal to the old Ming Mandate (Hay, 1994b). Hay describes how their paintings suspended the establishment of dynastic time. When Qing rule becomes legitimate could only be truly established in retrospect, after the remnants had died. Hay refers to two artists in particular, Zhang Feng and Gong Xian. Zhang worked allusively. Images of peace and tranquillity were coded to hint at disquiet and division within the landscape. In one album leaf a man looks towards the bright (Ming) moon and away from the sedentary (Qing) stream. In Hay’s reading, the landscape is split, its space constituted in two contradictory times. Gong’s work went further towards the creation of a symbolic space through which new time, Qing time, was absented. For example, Hay describes the 1689 painting, The Grain Rains, as a landscape which was actually a reconstruction of the Ming Imperial Tomb, the Zhongshan Mausoleum, at Nanjing. In the painting the Ming is mourned, but there is no space for the Qing to occupy. Time is held still by vacancy.

Hay’s work highlights two notions of the symbolic. At one point, the symbolic is presented as dependent on allusion and intended action, as when the scholar artist faces south, the geographical seat of Ming loyalty (Hay, 1994b: 191). The symbolic is here a relationship between represented action and meaning which operates as a shared code between artist and informed viewer. It is a habit of the oppressed to use a symbolic imaginary to communicate their experience to themselves and to their imagined community of fellow sufferers. In Zizek’s terms, an open identification with the world is impossible for the oppressed without betraying the real that silently informs their experience. Such an allusion then hints at an entire symbolic structure of meaning which is emphasized to prevent its disappearance, but which could not be represented except through icon and metonymic signifier. Emphasis is also present in a dominant symbolic. It is a common sign of semiotic authoritarianism (Benewick and Donald, 1996).

In his account of Gong Xian’s work, Hay uses a rather different conception of the symbolic. Here he draws out a symbolic structure whereby allusion is unnecessary. His approach to visual discourse, like Apter and Saich’s work on text and speech, assumes a Foucauldian understanding of discursive power. In Hay’s reading, Gong’s landscape is indeed an attempt to represent the real. Of course, it cannot be done. Instead, Gong presents a landscape in which the real is present but hidden from view. It is a composition where the lines and tensions are excluding, lonely, inviolably struck in grief. Here the landscape bears its meaning in a temporal and spatial logic that is either recognized in complicity, or misunderstood as a poetic abstraction. The possibility that landscapes were actual places, places with particular historical and political relevance is avoided. Yet many painters worked for patrons who would doubtless have wished for representations of
favourite places as well as a connoisseur's regard for style and tradition. Although landscape must be pictorial, represented and inviolate, the work of artists in the late Ming and, I argue, in the Maoist era suggest that it can also hold particular topographic and political significance in the sight of its contemporary consumers.

It is this second conception of the symbolic that creates space for a certain public imaginary. The different narrative structures of the paintings discussed by Hay function historically to politicize space. The year 1644—the official, retrospective 'beginning' of the Qing—is a moment of transition from one time to another that must be struggled over in the politics of the symbolic. History is the context for this struggle as well as the reward of victory. Once the victory is won the landscape is fixed, petrified in a static narrative which will endure until history, time and aesthetics are again contested in the national imagination. It is in periods of flux that the emphases within the actual elements of landscape will change. It is the points of change which map the nation. Just as in the transition from Ming to Qing, the landscapes of socialist realism after Liberation in 1949 were marked by change, new configurations of older styles. Once the new realism was central to the national imagination, however, the point was to keep newness firmly on the pictorial horizon.

**Moving the Mountain**

Shi Lu was an artist who had joined the Communist Party before Liberation and became a leading figure in the Xian guohua (nation-art) school. He was therefore prominent in the creation and dissemination of the new realism (Cohen, 1987; Andrews, 1994). As chief of the North West Pictorial, popularization of art was part of his official remit. His work, which included woodcuts, cartoons, New Year pictures, serial storybooks, as well as larger oils, was often exhibited in public spaces.

In 1959 he was commissioned to paint *Fighting in Northern Shaanxi* by the Museum of Revolutionary History. The painting shows the mountains in the region north of Yan'an, rugged, massive and tinged with red. On the mountain's top (it is hardly a peak, more a blunt ledge) Mao Zedong stands in profile, looking out of frame right. The red massif to his left thrusts up as a satellite in comradely alignment with the Leader. The scale and composition of the painting are quite outrageously anthropomorphic. The sky is a thin strip along the top. Sky is after all too ambiguous for this moment. It is an emptiness that cannot be easily filled by the weight of human concerns. Instead the background is crammed with distant ranges which snake and weave towards the foreground bloc. This bloc is in turn defined by the standing figure whose gaze steadies the mountain in the frame, pins it down to a specific historical and political meaning, owns it. The horizon is inverted. The meeting of land and sky at the top of the painting is here a barely observed convention. The horizon is in the power of Mao's gaze off-frame. It is also contained in the future that is already perfect, the reddened foreground that is a mirror in form and thought of the figure of Mao.
Mao’s size, a tenth of the height of the painting, bestows it with a heightened reality, a revolutionary romanticism. It also suggests age and weight. He is, quite literally, a big man; big enough, in this image, to span the time claimed by the Revolution. It may be titled Fighting in Northern Shaanxi, but for Mao the battle is retrospective. He is not the young fighter of the mid-1930s. He is already victorious, the national figurehead who declared Liberation in Tiananmen in 1949. Why then does he need to return here, to the battleground? The answer again lies in the necessity of hindsight. When the painting was commissioned in 1959, the battle for authority had been won. The legitimacy of the new regime depended on an absolute hold on historical narrative, which was to be visualized in a common imaginary across China. So in this painting there is a double claim. The landscape, chosen allusively as the place of revolutionary resurgence, is claimed figuratively by the presence of the Great Helmsman. Mao gives authority to the mountain, and allows it to be China. But, in the same gesture, the political legitimacy of Mao’s Liberation is fixed by the provision of a national landscape.
This is no ordinary dynasty, however. It is the dynasty of the People’s Republic, and it cannot lay open claim to the traditional Mandate of Heaven. In this dynasty Heaven offered less legitimacy for power than the promise of a future that power would bring about. It needed to be signalled to the people, to be constantly figured for them. The landscape is therefore markedly different from the multiplicity of landscapes in the scholar-painter and in commercial traditions. Perhaps its surface unfamiliarity is due to the figure of Mao which features so hugely. The mountains no longer reveal man to be a tiny dependent creature. On the contrary, these mountains need him to give them a meaning, to dub them Chinese. Mao wrote admiringly of the old man who moved the mountain. Shi Lu has used the tense perpendicular presence of a political man as a compositional device which holds the mountain together.

Qi
In his historical blockbuster Landscape and Memory, Simon Schama too considers variations on humanity’s relationship with mountains in Chinese art. Focusing on a 10th-century painting, Dreaming of Immortality in the Mountains, he remarks of the Daoist Immortals: ‘Such was their success at transcendence, in dissolving themselves into the vital breath of ch’i (qi), that they could materialize on the backs of stags or, as in one spectacular Taoist mountain painting, travel through the thin vaporous air’ (Schama, 1995: 407). As it happens, Schama is wrong about qi. Transcendence is not necessarily a feature of qi. Transformation – the ability of man to become mountain, or mountain to become man – is closer to the mark.

Qi is an exceptionally difficult word, and concept, to render in English. It is in everyday use, and yet it carries a great deal of philosophical weight. Although John Hay translates it as energy, he still feels the need to provide a long footnote on the unease surrounding the use of a word which simply does not have an English equivalent (Hay, 1994a: 75). Qi connotes energy, breath, life spirit and circulation, but its overall sense is more than the sum of these parts. It is, for instance, central to medical discourse on the harmony, or not, between the human body and its environment (Farquhar, 1994: 84–7).

Mencius, Meng Zi, a philosopher of the fourth century BC, used qi to capture in a word the driving force of Man as a courageous and sentient creature. D.C. Lau describes fourth-century thinking on qi (ch’i) as an explanation of life itself.

It was believed that the universe was made up of ch’i but this ch’i varied in consistency. The grosser ch’i, being heavy, settled to become the earth, while the refined ch’i, being light, rose to become the sky. Man, being half way between the two, is a harmonious mixture of the two kinds of ch’i. His body consists of grosser ch’i while his heart is the seat of the refined ch’i. Hence the term, hsuéh ch’i (blood and ch’i). It is in virtue of the refined ch’i that a man is alive and his faculties can function properly. (Lau, 1970: 24)
Mencius turns this qi into the property that ‘will unite righteousness and the way’ (ren and dao) (Lau, 1970: 25). In a world dominated by the politics of the secular, qi is the breath of the sublime. It is what makes a man a man, and it is also what determines his place between Heaven and Earth. Without this tripartite relationship, man is not of his time or his place. He has no weight. In Confucian cosmology the primary elements – heaven, earth and man – are ‘mutually immanent’. The key word is correlativity and not, despite Schama, transcendence. It is thus qi that, for example, allows ideas of the personal and the public to be perceived as complementary, not antagonistic (Ames and Hall, 1987: 17–25, 85ff).

Qi is also implicated in the movement of time. For Daoists life is a spontaneous and uncreated circulation of the whole of nature. The whole of nature tian . . . could be analysed with the life cycles of living organisms. “A time to be born and a time to die, a time for the founding of a dynasty and a time for its supersession” (Needham, 1964: 31). From these uses of the word I extrapolate a sense of immanent subjectivity, an ontology of what it is to be a person which is inseparable from the transformations and similarities of time, space, and the unspeakable presence of Heaven.

This underlines the extent of Schama’s error: Daoism neither has, nor needs, any concept of transcendence. The natural world is a natural (ziran) circulation of energy. There is no need for transcendence where transformation across an equal plane of being is available to the Immortal. To repeat, and to return to the landscape in Shi Lu’s painting, a man may indeed become a mountain, and a mountain may be the man, and then also the nation, without exceeding the philosophical or physiological boundaries of qi, at least as I understand it. Shi Lu’s socialist realism was still, in 1959, a symbolic structure under construction. Even so, it was hardly innocent of previous dynastic modes. The relocation of qi is the strategy of address to the moral template which is embedded in the viewing of Chinese landscape painting. The space of qi is emptied but not vacated. It is open to colonization, and it is the figure of Mao and thus the presence of the Party which fills the gap.

In looking at the symbolic landscapes of Chinese films since the Cultural Revolution, the concept of qi makes it possible to grasp the passion which is a part of human correspondence with an equivalent circulation of the natural world. Qi is also referred to in the revolutionary history film genre as a deliberate appropriation of the circulation of the natural world in favour of the dominant agency of the Party. This politicized qi is a bastardization of the concept, but one that should be understood as typical of the ways in which a genre uses traditional structures of feeling in order to engage and convince its audience.

**Qi and the Demon Lover**

And so, finally, I return to the landscape and cosmology of Yellow Earth, and the way in which they both demarcate and rework the symbolic public space of a national imaginary. The film is set in Shaanbei, part of Shaanxi, the
national landscape of the Maoist dynasty. Should it not then be absolutely familiar to the Chinese audience, at least those born in the 1950s? Apparently not. Yuejin Wang has commented that the terrain of Yellow Earth is as unfamiliar to a Chinese audience as it might be perversely glamorous — as perhaps Mao himself was glamorous to the enthusiasts of Tel Quel — to the Western eye.

To the average urban Chinese, these landscapes are equally alien, remote and ‘other-looking’, as they presumably appear to a Western gaze — and urban Chinese may well be struck by their ethnic difference and otherness while the Western mind might immediately ‘recognise’ their ethnic distinction as a presumably unified Chineseness. They are a cinematic representation of a cultural order both to the Western eye and the Chinese eye. (Chow, 1995: 81)

This seems strange. But, on reflection, might it not be an entirely predictable clue to the way in which the yellow earth of Yellow Earth has been re-aestheticized? The distanciation of art, outraniye, has defamiliarized the nation and its landscape so that it is literally strange, even unrecognizable. I am not sure that it is a matter of the ‘other’, as Yuejin Wang describes it. Or if it is, that may have emerged as a later development within the life of the text. Rather, the landscape is quoted in the context of a national myth, ironized by the undercutting of that myth in the telling, and thus stripped of national status as we watch — or rather as some people watched shortly after the film was released in 1984.

The resaying of the landscape is achieved through an inversion of another familiar narrativization of revolutionary history. Esther Yau argues that the genre of the revolutionary history film is concerned with mapping the narrative of the revolution through a combination of standard reference points. These are premised on Mao’s analysis of contradictions between the enemy and the people.

Summarily speaking, then, revolutionary history films schematised conflict by their mapping, in a precise and systematic manner, the set of political confrontations and social contradictions already laid out in Mao’s master texts according to the logic and trajectory of narrative conflicts and their resolution. (Yau, 1990: 267)

The enemy is, variously, the Japanese, the Guomindang and class enemies. Enemies were absolutely necessary to the discourse of China’s regeneration upon which the Party, especially under Mao’s leadership, based its power. In these films the Party holds the power of agency, but it does so through an uncomfortable manipulation of complementary correlativity with the chosen aggressor. The agent of good is the representative of the Party. The subject of the struggle is generally ‘of the people’, and generally subaltern — a poor peasant (as in Tracks in the Snowy Forest, Liu Peiran, August First Studio, 1960), a member of an ethnic minority community or a woman. Yau discusses in particular those films which employ the female subject. These
narratives follow a pattern of loss and redemption. A young woman is deserted or abused or both by the forces of patriarchy. She tries to save herself but can only achieve this with the help of a Party representative, in the person of a young and sexually desirable man. The woman's redemption is marked by an event which is a materialization of Party power or spirit—qi. This event might be a battle or her first ritual killing of a class enemy (The Red Detachment of Women, Xie Jin, Tian-na Studios, 1960), the burning of Confucian texts (The White-Haired Girl, Wang Pin and Shui Ha, Dongbei Studios, 1950). The young man and woman are finally brought together in the presence of the Party, symbolized by a flag, a military victory or just a mutual ecstatic gaze off screen. Their togetherness is not consummated, and in some films (The Red Detachment of Women) the young man dies in the course of his heroic duty and any thought of sexual fulfilment is ended.

Yau's point is that the female revolutionary is always sutured into a discourse of male supremacy which is fixed by the power of the patriarchal enemy and the agency of the Party representative. The enemy is a demon, whose demonic nature arises from the contradictions of his class or his politics. The lover is similarly determined by the spirit of the Party. He can never consummate the woman's passion because his qi is not his own to give. The demon and the lover exchange the woman as a vital signifier of their alternate ascendance on behalf of their respective driving forces. At the core of these films is a battle for control over life itself. Hero and villains scuffle over the mind/body—the two are undifferentiated—of a young woman in order to demonstrate their agency, which for them is authority over living matter.

Revolutionary history films offer one model of this logic. They tell the story of a struggle for the imaginary place of Heaven from the narrative standpoint of the secular victor. The narration of these films is slanted so that the winner is signalled from the beginning. What is absent is the sense that the scuffle is meaningless. If meaning is understood as a result of a connection and unity across space and time, the nature of Heavenly authority—the authority to make meaning possible—is of paramount political necessity. In the late 20th century the Heaven of the dynastic imaginary has given way to a worldly authority. The future perfect of Maoist belief completes the narrative logic of existence. Yet the concept of a holistic life force, a circulation of qi, allows this model to be irrupted from within its own generic structures. In victory, the tension point of qi is always relocated in the focus of the socialist realist gaze and in the unconsummated passion of the new recruit (Hemelryk, 1995). In Yellow Earth, however, the model is used as a template for its own destruction. The strangeness felt by the audience, by Li Tuo and Yuejin Wang, is a reaction to a separation of space and time from the narrative logic which would give them connection and unity.

The film's narrative of a young female peasant, Cuiqiao, threatened by a forced marriage and given hope by the teaching of a Communist soldier sounds familiar, but it is not. Both demon and lover are separated from their
qi, and so are estranged from their narrative history. The demon is present in the knowledge of Cuiqiao’s fate, but it/he is not personified within the Maoist scheme of contradiction. There is no Japanese oppressor, no secret agent of the Guomindang, no scheming landlord. There are her fellow peasants, members of the same class, who will force her to act out the traditions of female slavery. In the first of her ‘bitter songs’, Cuiqiao laments:

In the sixth month the ice in the river hasn’t thawed
It’s my own father who is dragging me to the wedding board
Of all the five grains the bean is the roundest,
Of all the people the daughter is the saddest
Up in the sky, pigeons fly, one with the other,
The only dear one that I long for is my mother.
(McDougall, 1991: 192–3)

And there is the yellow earth.
The lover is Gu Qing. He is supposedly the agent of the Party, and like the model lovers his qi is not his own. Yet he has no cathartic moment of heroism, there is no visible enemy, and he fails to redeem Cuiqiao from her misery. If there are enemies they cannot be vanquished. The peasant culture that condemns Cuiqiao is the object of Gu Qing’s attention. It is necessary for his agency to have a legitimate focus. The hindsight of history in the model narrative tells us that the peasant class will be extolled in Mao’s Yan’an Talks. In anticipation of Mao’s exhortation to go among the people, Gu Qing is doing field work with his notebook, collecting songs, in particular the bitter songs (ku ger) that express the suffering of farmers in a harsh terrain. The film exploits the technical potentialities of representation and reproduction to debunk history. It does so while depicting Gu Qing’s attempt to achieve that same history through a very basic method of record and appropriation. The resaying of history is at stake in both the narrative and narration of the text (Chow, 1995).

The other enemy is the yellow earth itself. But again, Gu Qing can have only an ambiguous relationship with this landscape. It is the site and source of his mission. The Communist Revolution had set out to harness the dispersed strength of rural China by taking hold of its hardships and transforming them. This is not simply to state the obvious, that Communism promised to reorganize national life so that the peasantry would have an easier time of it. Rather, it is to say that they sought to transform the meaning of the place in which this suffering occurred, and thereby to effect change on an imaginary level in order to create a space in which real reform could literally take place. Land reform was a rhetoric of freedom; it did not make the ground softer nor the rain wetter. The achievement was perhaps to persuade peasants that government-sponsored irrigation works would be more reliable than the Dragon King.

In the film’s final scene hundreds of farmers are praying to the Dragon King for rain. Gu Qing appears on the horizon. He rises from the meeting of land and sky and walks against the tide of human folly. Is he then the perfect manifestation of manly qi, or Arendt’s agency? He has found his place
between heaven and earth and he occupies it with courage and sentience. Yet the audience knows that his return is already too late. Cuiqiao has fled her marriage and disappeared over, or into, the river. Furthermore, his progress seems so slow that it might be a mirage. The camera holds him in a relentless and repetitive long shot. The political logic of the film-makers draws to a conclusion of brilliant anomaly. If Gu Qing occupies a harmonious position in the circulation of the natural world, he cannot move forward as a successful agent of the Party. The Party stakes its legitimacy on a perfected future, a horizon which is only visible through the medium of its gaze, its agency. In the final scene of Yellow Earth, Gu Qing’s gaze has been recuperated from him by the landscape. He has himself become part of the horizon. His agency, which has been ironized throughout the film, is finally removed and handed to the audience on a visual plate. In this moment the Party disappears from the text and the landscape. The struggle for dynastic time is again suspended as the audience, in the now of watching the film, holds the horizon in its gaze. The disassembly of history through the restatement of the place itself estranges the audience from the national landscape, and the public imaginary which has been contained in it. Nation, public and landscape are freed to start again.

The film, originally titled Silent is the Ancient Plain, was retitled Yellow Earth after the film-makers had viewed the rushes and seen the colour of the film on screen (Chow, 1995). But in this reworking of the revolutionary history film, Yellow Earth is an eponymous title. The landscape is a central player in the drama which reveals itself as a drama over who may act, and on whose behalf. The landscape takes on generic demands and turns them inside out. The landscape is both demon and lover. Its moment of consumption is not, however, deflected by a non-sexual trinity of Man, Woman and Party Spirit. It enjoys a double consummation. Cuiqiao is consumed beneath the waters of the river, and the Party song goes down with her. Gu Qing, who misses this moment entirely, is himself taken by the earth as he trudges endlessly forward with no prospect of progress or escape. A national landscape has become the demon lover, capable of devouring both the object of its passion and the agency of its rivals.

References
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