52. K. Stierle, *Petrarcas Landschaft. Zur Geschichte ästhetischer Landschaftserfahrung* (Krefeld: Scherpe, 1979), p. 26.

53. A. Koschorke, *Die Geschichte des Horizonts*, p. 53. Koschorke goes on to observe that "distance and sky, which converge in the horizon, [take up] the same place in the paintings which, in the fourteenth century, was almost always occupied by the gold foundation or an illuminated color foundation." The gold foundation, which can be understood as the imageless placeholder of transcendence and immateriality in the image, is thus replaced by phenomena from the world of appearances.

12 Landscapes of Class in Contemporary Chinese Film: From *Yellow Earth* to *Still Life*

Stephanie Hemelryk Donald

Few would dispute the connection between the delineation of modernity at the turn of the century and the development of the modern metropolis.
—Frisby (2001), p. 159

In David Frisby's work on cityscapes of modernity, he asserts the theme of twentieth-century European sociology, that the modern is an urban phenomenon, and that the landscape of modernity is therefore a cityscape. Frisby, and most others, were looking at European and American cities for their inspiration. Now, at the end of the last century and in the present era, the development of Chinese modernity in the Reform period is the focus of the world's attention. This is not to say that modernity has not been underway in China for at least 150 years; rather, China's global visibility is now such that the frenzy of accelerated modernization is sometimes mistaken for a sudden onslaught of modernity per se. In this essay I will suggest that, while the urbanization of China is indeed the big story of China's physical infrastructure, nonetheless the slow burn of development has been having an impact on the Chinese landscape, rural and urban, for a very long time. The landscaping of China is partly about modernization, a little about modernity (depending on how liberal one is with that definition), but mostly about a longer narrative of continuous and traumatic pressure inflicted by the people on the motherland. The struggle between beauty and pragmatism is acknowledged in films about the poor, and manifested through the class aspirations of the new rich. It is then the signs of struggle that articulate the Chinese landscape as a work of destruction and reconstruction in constant progress.

Living in the Chinese Landscape: "We'll Just Keep Running"

In his expansive discussion of Chinese development and its impact on the human and physical environment, Peter Kessler recalls the many visitors to

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China who have bemoaned the lack of landscape, recording only "a peasant, a field, a road, a village" as they travel by train across the northern provinces.[1] Kessler's point is that Chinese history might also be thought of as an endlessly repetitive story of power taken, lost, and resumed, but with no sense of momentum or shift as the years and the regimes pass by. His points are provocative, but nonetheless observant and evocative, as understanding the physical and historical landscapes of China does indeed require a specific way of looking and thinking about change and continuity. The reader of Kessler's book, the China scholar, or the visitor, must come to grips with the temporal scale of Chinese history and, by extrapolation, with the spatial nuance and sweep of Chinese land. Traveling by train across the north and down the coastal provinces reveals "peasant, field, road, village" and, one might also argue, "mega-city suburb, concrete town, scrubland." Traveling further to the south one will encounter all of the above but also (although perhaps not out of the train window) mountains with swirling mist at their foot, immediately recalling and verifying water and ink (*shuimo*) landscape paintings that might in any other tradition be fanciful, but here are a more or less absolute rendering of place. North or south, the landscape is not, however, unchanging, nor has it been so in the past. As I hope to show in the following discussion, the landscape of China has been shaped by its people, its politics, and its climatic conditions at a rate that is not necessarily commensurate with its historical patterning, but which is nonetheless sensitive to movements within and across such seasonal adjustments. One might summarize these in terms of the regular fluctuations of dynastic power, the slow but profound emergence of modernity (an urban phenomenon from the 1860s through to the present), and both the revolutionary and reform-era high-velocity shifts in farming, industry, and urbanization. All these have continued over many years, and some have had a direct impact on the spatial formation and reformation of the landscape over generations. The most obvious contemporary example is the high levels of urbanization since the 1980s. The growth of towns is a direct outcome of Reform policy, supported by decentralized planning initiatives that have actively encouraged provincial areas to engage in high-density production and capitalization of their major asset, people. The people, particularly rural people whose livelihood as farmers continues to be comparatively poor, have responded in waves of urban migration and return, causing population stress for both the new provincial cities and the metropolitan centers of Shanghai and Beijing. The "peasant, field, road, village" must increasingly be understood as extensions of urban environments and ecosystems shattered by overfarming on the one hand and a lack of year-round pastoral care on the other. The land is no longer enough.

Yet we should recall that this is not only a story of the last thirty years of reform management and economics. The environmental historian Mark Elvin has argued that governments in the old kingdoms that used to comprise the current geopolitical reality of China long made environmental impact a tool of influence and a rationale for harmony among people and the land. He quotes a gazetteer of the early nineteenth century writing of events of previous centuries in the far southwest: "They cut channels in the sides of hill and drew water from the springs. They constructed dikes and built dams to hold water. . . . Thus when the weather turned to drought, they had water to provide for irrigation. . . . All the wasteland among the forests was fully developed." He goes on to justify this in terms wider than agricultural survival:

> The commandery of Lian used long ago to be described as a place of disease due to pestilential vapours, on account of its deep valleys and dense woods. The population was sparse, and the aethers of the Bright and Dark forces not healthy. . . . It was always overcast with rain, and there were floods in its streams and torrents. . . . At the present time, the forests are sparse and the torrents widened out. The light from the sky above shines down; the population is dense and every day more forests are opened up. . . . It is a long time since Lian and Lingshan were affected by disease due to pestilential vapors.[2]

Elvin's work traces a history of environmental change that is closely associated with legitimation of governance and order in the centralizing networks of power represented by imperial rule. Elvin's argument demonstrates that, in the circles of government at least, discourses of modernization were contesting those of belief and superstition. While the appreciation of landscape, management of the elements, and the cultivation of agricultural land were all necessary and easily demonstrable components of good government, they were also easily related to the Gods and to supernatural intervention. Thus, arguments over the sources of quality in an emerging "Chinese" geopolitical sphere could be thrashed out over land, landscape, and the "placing" of power.

The current rhetoric of harmonization, the "harmonious society" of the current Party state, is concerned to claim that the whole nation—rich and poor—can move forward together to solve the problems of change and modernization. Contemporary history does not claim that it has achieved improvements in land-use. Where Elvin's gazetteers welcomed the attention to shaping land for human habitation, now it is painfully obvious that intense human occupation is proving harmful to the Chinese landscape.

Social and economic harmonization is still given as the answer to all modern ills, however, and this anthropomorphic present and future is manifest in the fashion for lifestyle enclaves.[3] Spindly trees, brooks, and grassy golf courses are the centerpieces to these places of sanctuary for those seeking a lifestyle landscape. Yet even there, the clear-sighted are aware of the precariousness of the perfect place in a ruined ecology. In recent conversations in one such up-market development outside the Sichuanese city, Chengdu, residents commented that they had moved out of the city to get away from pollution, but did not think that they would ever have moved far enough for safety. They were determined to stay in China but were uncertain of just how far from the centers of human activity they would need to go. "We'll just keep running," said one woman somewhat ruefully.

Landscapes of Class

Those residents were self-identifying members of the new middle class. A small but influential sector of the population, they could afford to make choices, albeit constrained ones, to decide how far and where they might run away from the unmanaged effects of change.[4] Their choice reflects the degree to which social positioning affects relationships between people and landscape, particularly in the creation of micro-landscapes designed to mitigate the disasters of overpopulation and industrialization, and perhaps even to the extent of allowing one the luxury of "seeing" landscape at all. For many peasants in the same area, lifestyle developments entail the loss of their fruit farms, and cause enforced relocations to the city from which the new occupants are escaping. The power of class is evident in the spatial formations of change and mobility. Class is not a new word in Chinese politics, but it is a newly articulated notion[5] that allows the concept of "harmonious society" to hinge on the elaboration of the success of the middle-income (actually high–income, but the harmonious term "*zhong* = middle" is preferred) consumer and the wealthy to a wider population. The actual likelihood of that extension is doubtful in the immediate future, especially given the environmental problems of modernity, which hit the poorest hardest and first.

The emergence of a class discourse in China is associated with two moments of Party history. The first, in 1949, was the victory of the CCP and the establishment of the People's Republic of China. At that point, what Apter and Saich[6] have called the "exegetical bonding" of identity to Maoist-Marxist-Leninist orderings of peasant, worker, landlord, and intellectual classes (to name a few in a more complex system) was set to be nationalized beyond the imaginations of the CCP strongholds of Yan'an (in Shaanxi) and the Party faithful in Shanghai and Jiangsu. The second iteration is much more recent, and has grown from the post 1978 Reform era (reforms, it should be noted, that were planned at least fifteen years earlier by Deng Xiaoping), and the appearance of new social stratifications, haves and have-nots, and—most recently—new structures of taste and feeling in people's approach to their priorities and lifestyle choices. *Class* is again speakable and semantically necessary, because it cannot be endlessly denied or written off as a revolutionary error when it is working its way through society with such bravado at the present time. Nor can it be completely understood as a top-down articulation of social or political management—although that is, of course, still part of the picture—but must be approached as a complex phenomenon stemming from Reform economics, personal wealth creation, and an awareness of global and domestic contingencies and conditions of life. Class is now apparent and observable, not solely as a political category based on the organization of production, but as a mode of being in a society newly oriented to money as the most important marker of success, and aspiration as a core value in everyday life.

The apparent ubiquity of the middle-class idea (*zhongchan jieji*) in China is, however, predominantly an urban phenomenon and is mostly associated with larger cities. This is not to say that rural and small-town folk do not have aspirations, nor that some of them do not succeed in achieving wealth and self-betterment, but that the prevailing trend is for urbanites to feel morally and financially superior to subprovincial and rural conationals. It has indeed been argued that the middle class is not a new grouping at all, but merely another descriptor for long-term high-level financial success and political privilege. In this account the Chinese version of the "new rich"—a categorization that was used to sum up the success of Asian capitalism in the early 1990s[7]—includes those with leadership ambitions in key sectors of government, the economy, and cultural provision. The scope of the category of the Chinese middle class is somewhat more porous than that, especially given that it is not merely the possibilities for conspicuous consumption[8] but also the taste for "quality" of life that characterizes the new urban so-called élites. They are indeed determinedly pursuing the tasteful consumption of cultural goods, but they are also articulating a desire to achieve the best possible lifestyle for themselves and their children according to quite varied levels of income, means, and social relations. So, class is something more than *origin* and *production*, and is very much associated with how people envisage their place in the national landscape, in both symbolic and actual terms.

The idea of "landscapes of class" pulls together the two themes of contemporary Chinese social change—environment and the stratification of a modern society. Social stratification is increasingly discussed in sociological literature but is also becoming important to debates on culture. The rural–urban divide remains the most remarked division, but there are increasing subtleties in the ways in which class is remarked. A recent piece on cinema characterized the "complicated and intriguing codes" of filming certain bodies as "classed" portraits,[9] while Chew has used the present phenomenon of class discourse to interrogate the sartorial slips between provincialism and style in the "global cultural hierarchy."[10] The relation between class and the environment remains relatively unexplored. In the remainder of this discussion I would like to suggest that two of the key texts of Reform-era cinema, Chen Kaige's *Huang Tudi (Yellow Earth)*, 1984, and Jia Zhangke's *Sanxia Haoren (Still Life*, literally *Good People of the Three Gorges)*, 2006, can be viewed as landscapes of class, book-ending the Reform era from the early 1980s to the present.[11] While the films actively focus on class differences, between soldier and peasant in *Yellow Earth*, and between impoverished migrant and successful entrepreneurs in *Still Life*, they do so in specific and significant landscapes. These spatial articulations of a shared idea of China illustrate the atemporal relation between historical seasons (revolution, reform, modernity) and the manipulation of the natural world, within which human mobility is symptomatic of both without claiming ascendancy on either. Meanwhile, China itself appears as an idea that is supported by the assertion of national, political power. In both films, Mao Zedong is a continuing immanence in the mountains, a presence behind the appropriation of rural hinterlands for infrastructure projects to support the urban drift, while also central to the dictum of maintaining certain iconic spots of "national landscape" in the visual lexicon of Chinese society and politics.

The two texts emanate from what have been seen as competing discourses of post-Mao cinema,[12] but are nonetheless and likewise linked across the seasons of film style by their regional choices of location, their concern with the contrast between privileged and nonprivileged perspectives on major social change, and their subtle reference to Mao's influence in historicizing China's landscapes to the cause of revolutionary, and now Reform, dynamics and development. It is also relevant that Jia has stated admiration for *Yellow Earth* as one of the few 1980s "fifth generation" titles that he appreciates.[13] These films are connected, then, by the sensibility of directors at certain moments in their artistic development, by the imaginary of Chinese modernity and the continuing influence of Mao, and by the topographical laylines of the major hinterlands of Chinese modern history.

Yellow Earth, a landmark film set in northern Shaanxi, was made by Chen and filmed by Zhang Yimou, both at the beginning of their now famous careers. A soldier visits a peasant community to listen to their songs, learn about their lives, and spread the word of revolution. It is the 1930s, and peasant hardship is extreme. The narrative enunciates this suffering by juxtaposing the warmth of human interaction with stark and barren landscape shots that visually overwhelm the protagonists and literally render futile their hopes for a better future. The film was noted at its release for its use of space and its relation of the apparent endlessness of the Shaanxi landscape to the timelessness of the peasant condition. A small family of a father and two children eke out a living on tough ground, which is hard at the best of times, frozen in winter, and often in drought. Their songs are of grief and toil, and the sound of their singing is harsh and aching, binding those that sing to the landscape, which echoes and fosters the timbre of their voices. Thus, the idea of "borrowing" these bitter songs and reappropriating them for optimistic lyrics on new China would require that the landscape itself is somehow changed, or made gentle. This, the film is sure, cannot happen.

In *Still Life*, the setting is contemporary. Jia is a filmmaker from Shanxi who has done a great deal to correct the need for films that essay the provincial urban landscape of small towns (*Unknown Pleasures*, *Platform*, and *Xiao Wu*), and the relatively modest but potentially divisive aspirations of their people.[14] In his most recent film (from 2006), *The World*, Jia follows a family of Shanxi migrants into a Beijing theme park, and narrates the painful contingencies of the underclass of migrants in the capital. The argument of that film is that, although migrants are utterly necessary to the everyday workings of Beijing's international, reform economy model, they have little or no access to either the "real world" or to the reality of a middle-income success story, and are more likely to die in an undercompensated industrial accident than to achieve the modern life for which they made the trek to the metropolis. In *Still Life*, Jia visits the classic landscapes of China's hinterland and makes them central to his narrative of China's modernization. Here, his key characters are again from Shanxi. One is a coal miner (San Ming—who also appears in minor roles as a character in *The World* and *Platform*), a quiet man whose reasonableness is apparent but whose quiet stoicism makes him a subject rather than an agent of the change around him. The other major character is a nurse (Shen Hong), also visiting the area from Shanxi to find her husband. Indeed both are coming

south to find their spouses. San Ming is seeking his estranged wife, simply because he wants to see her and, especially, his daughter, after a sixteen-year absence. Hong wants to tell her husband, who has all but deserted her while making a fortune in construction and destruction in the Three Gorges Dam project, that she is leaving him for someone else and moving to Shanghai. Thus the narrative of the film is centered on movement between and across the key sites of Chinese history, development, and outlook. Between Shanxi, Sichuan, and the idea of Shanghai, *Still Life* traverses the scope of China. The film requires an understanding of the present as premised on the past, as much as the face of reform (Shanghai) is dependent on the ravages of development in China's West and on the movement of peoples from the northwest to populate (and indeed depopulate) that development.

The film's action is set in Sichuan in a small town, Fengjie, on the Yangtze. The town is being progressively flooded as the dam project moves forward. Many people in the town are sojourners, coming to work on the destruction sites. As a result the small town has become a minor hub of inner China cosmopolitanism, as people move through and learn about each other's origins in other parts of China's national landscape. The foreignness of the northern visitors is pointed out in a sequence when a landlord is initially unable to understand San Ming's dialect, and is reiterated by San Ming's own inadequacy in comprehending the daily realities of this somewhat chaotic site of transformation.

The film opens on a ferry, which has traveled on tributaries and thus down the Yangtze River to Fengjie. The first scene is one of Jia's signature long takes as the camera travels around the boat showing us the chatter and excitement of "ordinary people" as they travel for work, or to see the Gorges as they are depicted in the images and poems of Chinese culture—iconic symbols in the national imagination. These sights will of course soon be unrecognizably changed by the flooding project and become icons of modern developmental brutalism. Much of the old town of Fengjie is already underwater, but there are still levels of habitation in use, although also due for immersion, once the job of demolition is complete on each level. Above the rising waters, a new town has sprung up, although many of the original residents have already left or are leaving, seeking out new lives and means of livelihood in other provinces, Liaoning, Guangdong, or even Shanxi—where the little ferry has come from. In one poignant scene a young girl of sixteen years asks Shen Hong if they need maids where she comes from. Shen Hong does not answer the question directly, although by saying that she comes from Shanxi, she does in fact respond in the negative: Maids are only linked to the biggest cities and major domains of migration, namely, in the south and on the eastern seaboard. But, for a moment, we are reminded of the young girl, Cuiqiao, in *Yellow Earth*, fruitlessly asking the errant soldier if he will take her with him when he returns to base camp in the south. North to south, south to east, the girls seek to travel to catch up with contemporary China, but in both cases their mobility is held back by their class position. Even if the young Sichuanese does make it to Shanghai as a maid (*dagongmei*), she will be very fortunate to earn enough or to have the right kind of employers to take her much further up the ladder toward a middle-income existence. Cuiqiao does not even make it safely across the Yellow River.

Meanwhile, in Fengjie, older residents argue with local officials over compensation for their flooded homes, or with factory bosses over conditions of work. As are the lives of those who inhabit it, this landscape is precarious. The rugged beauty of the Kuimen (Kui Gate), the famous rounded hills that frame the river entry to Fengjie's part of the river, is still apparent, but it is scarred by the rising concrete of the new town in the foreground, and by the ugly bridges necessitated by the dam. As the night draws in and colored lights are turned on for the evening, a successful entrepreneur waves his arm toward the bridge and its garish lighting scheme, boasting to business colleagues that he has realized what originally was envisioned by Mao, the recapture of a national landscape for modernity.

The landscapes in the two films, one in Shaanxi in the northwest and Fengjie in Sichuan in the west, are linked by their regional proximity, as much as they are separated by provincial differences. The national narrative, as encapsulated by the Shaanxi plains of revolutionary history, and the Sichuan gorges of modern development, is in the west of China, not on the booming eastern seaboard of Shanghai and Beijing. Likewise, the class disparities of the whole of China, which are the main talking point of politicians and social activists in China's centers of influence, are seen clearly at these points of origin and sojourn. In this context, the approved narrative of the urban middle class seems both a distorted version of change and a vision of social harmony that is as doubtful as the Kuimen bridge's spanning of the once beautiful gate.

Despite the travesties of environmental development and social ordering, and notwithstanding the views of a filmmaker like Jia, Andrew Nathan has recently commented (in response to a much earlier "post-Tiananmen" discussion on the regime's health), "there is much . . . evidence . . . to suggest that . . . the regime as a whole continues to enjoy high levels of acceptance."[15] This acceptance is presumably based on a promise of further

future development, in creating a national landscape of class that includes the interests of farmers and workers. The trouble is, just as Jia (and this critic) wonders in horror at the lights over Kuimen, so the peasants are reviled as unable to grasp the credentials of middle-income taste. In China the rural working class is no longer simply *nongmin* (peasants)—always an ambiguous term in terms of benefit in any case and always considered in need of improvement—but is now quite openly spoken of as those without sufficient quality (*suzhi*) to be classed at all.

Meanwhile, in urban areas, especially in the many small towns and cities that characterize China's development, but also in the large metropoles and the planned megacities, there are only those who are poor, richer than before (*bi qian fu*), or doing very well indeed (*xiaokang, xingui*). Thus, likewise, there is no real benefit to being "working class" in political discourse in China today; there is only aspiration, and aspiration is based on middle-class market access, however that occurs. Indeed, Elizabeth Perry has pointed out that to be *gongmin* (worker) is actually dangerous if you espouse aspiration in the wrong way.[16] Those who set up labor movements or lead other forms of political activity are more likely to be punished by death than, for instance, students who do not have worker credentials or those who run carefully balanced NGOs, which urge certain types of reform—environmental, property ownership, and so on—but do not directly challenge the state by appeals to working class solidarity (or sheer numbers).

These class issues are fundamental to understanding the dynamics of *Still Life*, where the main character and those he meets in the waterside town of Fengjie are excluded from the middle-class hopes, aesthetics, and lifestyle of the people who are "running away" from the smog of Chengdu traffic. Even within the ranks of the relatively dispossessed, there are gradations of "quality." San Ming is variously mocked even on arrival "off the boat" from Shanxi by those who are similarly poor, but who at least are local and already fluent in the habits of migration. Of course, within the oeuvre of Jia's work we know that there is a San Ming who has been to Beijing, but there is no certainty that this is the same man merely because it is the same actor, or that any character is more than a cipher of the era, endlessly starting anew in different parts of the country. Nonetheless, and perhaps in contradiction to the disappearance of formal working-class consciousness, San Ming does find a certain camaraderie, perhaps what we could describe as latent or resurgent class recognition, with others in similar conditions. In particular, he finds his way to an unlikely friendship with a younger man. In this extremely tenuous society, where everyone is

always about to leave the flood zone and move somewhere else, and where hopes are based on the ability to survive or even to capitalize on traumatic upheavals, their friendship is based on atemporal fragments and competing nostalgias of the Reform era. This is captured in a sequence where they compare their mobile ring-tones. Both tunes are nostalgic; San Ming's is an old-style ballad of good will to good men, *haoren*, while the young man uses a contemporary sentimental ballad for the waters of the Yangtze. This hopeful relationship culminates in the young man's death in an industrial accident, when the sound of his doleful, tinny ringtone in the rubble indicates to San Ming where he lies.

The unevenness of modernity is also key to the tragic central relationships in *Yellow Earth*, both within and across class structures. In the respective moral structure of the two films and periods, the peasant is now the migrant worker, while the revolutionary can be equated with the entrepreneurial new rich in *Still Life*. In *Yellow Earth* privileged access to the revolutionary future is represented by a 1930s educated soldier/cultural worker who, collecting songs for redeployment with upbeat lyrics, is helping to create a symbolic language and aesthetics of new China, through which peasant culture will be filtered and managed. Through *Still Life* and *The World*, we are reminded that the labor of the migrant workers is used to create symbols of reform—from the bizarre bridge lights at Kuimen to the sophisticated skyscrapers of Shanghai.

Landscapes of the Nation

In 1979, three years after the death of Mao and the humiliation of the Gang of Four, John K. Fairbank observed: "This rural industrialization bears the stamp of Chairman Mao. . . . Tarnished or not, his monument is in the countryside."[17] In 1997, in an earlier paper on Mao and landscape in *Yellow Earth*, I noted that the landscapes of Shaanxi had been symbolically occupied by Mao by virtue of the Yan'an base histories—which orient revolutionary history as a whole—and the subsequent memorializing of the man and the mountain in a 1959 painting by Shi Lu, *Fighting in Northern Shaanxi*:

> Mao's size, a tenth of the height of the painting, bestows it with a heightened reality, a revolutionary romanticism. . . . It may be titled *Fighting in Northern Shaanxi*, but for Mao [in this aspect] the battle is retrospective. He is not [depicted as] the young fighter of the mid-1930s. He is already victorious, the national figurehead who declared Liberation . . . in 1949. . . . The legitimacy of the new regime is [contained and commissioned through this picture]. . . . [T]he political legitimacy of Mao's Liberation is fixed by the provision of a national landscape.[18]

Fairbank's note[19] that the national landscape of China's hinterland was also the monument to Mao suggests that the painting was prescient of the enormous effects that the man and his regime would wreak in the provinces. Chen's *Yellow Earth* comments directly on the gap between peasant immiseration and the revolutionary rhetoric of liberation and the "national landscape." The peasant father in the film bears an uncanny resemblance also to "Father"; Luo Zhangli's 1980 portrait of the essential peasant man, still the face of poverty four years after Mao's death, and thus the film also refers us to the historical atemporalities that frame the classed experiences of the present.

In another symptom of atemporality, Chen's film treats the Shaanxi landscape with extreme, almost fetishistic, respect. While evacuating its revolutionary credentials he nonetheless returns the landscape to the category of a repository of Chineseness for the urban imagination to savor and eschew, which the revolutionary histories also encourage. In 1984, *Yellow Earth* was a surprising essay on a betrayed people in a landscape under siege from the rising political waves of the 1930s. The mountainous and barren ranges of Shaanxi are shown to be home to peasants who are mired in superstitions, and whose class cannot be transcended by the hopes and trust proffered by the men who walk from the south. Now, and in relation to the massive dislocation of peasants and to the rapid urbanization of China's provinces since 1984, the unequal power of the culturally privileged, the politically competent, and the economically effective with the poverty and relative powerlessness of those who work the land, seems to be the film's retrospective contribution to debates in China about seeking harmony, about land grabs, and about the price of development in terms of the environment.

In Jia's film too, the landscape is as much a class player and a national icon as are the people who inhabit it. Nearly thirty years apart, the films speak to the end of one era and the start of another. They also bracket, or describe, a provincial axis of modern China—from Shanxi to Sichuan—which places Beijing beyond consciousness altogether—except in the presumed person of final arbitrary political control—and which positions Shanghai as the preferred destination for the "classy" and the beautiful (such as the second, female protagonist in the film, Shen Hong), but not a place that is yet available or imaginable to the majority of the population. In *Still Life* we are told that peasant migrants escaping from the rising waters of the Three Gorges go east and south, but mainly to Guangzhou, the nearest, biggest urban destination for making a new life and some money. This is an accurate summary of how people move in China today.

It is common to meet, say, hairdressers, who have moved from Sichuan to Guangzhou, and then perhaps, have finally been taken up by an entrepreneur who moves to Shanghai to make more money with his "creative team." There are, however, other people who cannot move, who do not have transferable skills from land to city, or who are too old or too timid to start again. These are the ones who are without sufficient "quality" to make their way in new China, and who are most in need of succor in a promised harmonious society. They are rather like Cuiqiao trying to cross the river at the end of *Yellow Earth*: They must either swim against the current of capital accumulation and precarious livelihoods, or sink.

The idea of a shared national landscape is necessary to the idea of a unified China. However, while the class of habitation affects what level of power one has on the construction of the landscape, the unexpected cosmopolitanism of migrancy creates dialogues that both destabilize and confirm the nation. This is delicately narrated in *Still Life*. San Ming is sitting with other workers from the demolition sites, trying to find a way to communicate, if you like, to articulate their shared Chineseness in such a way that transcends the differences of provincial cultures and language. A banknote—a 10 yuan note—is produced, when a Sichuan man asks if San Ming noticed the Kaimen when he passed through the Gorges on the boat on his way south. San Ming doesn't know what his workmate is talking about, so he is shown the image of the famous mountainous river pass on the back of the note—an image he must have handled almost every day of his adult life without knowing where it was or what it might ever have to do with his own destiny. He then reaches into his own wad and pulls out a 50 yuan note, which shows a similar iconic scene from the national landscape—a mountainous pass in Shanxi "Hukou Falls," both images as iconic as the mountain in *Fighting in Northern Shaanxi*. As the men look at the images and flip the notes to and fro, the face of Mao—visible on the other side of both notes, of course—goes unremarked. Both men compliment the other on the beauty of their own province, and the Sichuan man agrees to look out for the sight when he moves north for more work. When San Ming checks out Kaimen, the shot opens with a close-up of Mao's face on the banknote, before he turns it over to compare the sight of the Kuimen with the banknote's depiction of it.

In a later conversation the same men are sharing farewells as San Ming prepares to return home. They ask him about possible well-paid work in the Shanxi region and he tells them that coal mining will bring them about five times what they earn as a daily wage on demolition sites. Anyone with familiarity with contemporary China hears that conversation

with huge foreboding. China's mining industry is extremely dangerous; safety regimes are regularly flouted and many hundreds if not thousands of men die every year in accidents. The two scenes therefore bring together—as does *Yellow Earth*, in a different way—the new inequalities and immiseration of China's second industrial revolution, or the Reform era that we are witnessing today, with the romance of a shared national landscape and a Chineseness that transcends the obvious barriers of language, culture, and experience in different provinces.

Still Life is also a film about beauty, and it offers both a description of the consolidation of the power of urban middle class in appropriating beauty to the national narrative of cohesion and a critique of the loss of beauty through the loss of place (through the double destruction of both natural environments and human habitations and communities).

The film is closely concerned with the images on the national currency, and what might become of them as actual environments. When the entrepreneur proudly points out the lights of the bridge, it is an awful sight in both senses of the word. The magic of what is now a memory of unspoiled beauty is rendered garish and semiurban by the bridge itself, the wrecked buildings around it, and the pollution of light. It is perhaps not fanciful to suggest that this incorporation of the landscape into the national discourse of self-improvement, enforced quality, and accelerated modernization is on a continuum with the blandishments of the new versions of classy beauty that are under construction in the lifestyle magazines in Shanghai.[20] Entrepreneurial, state-managed bridge lighting is supposed to harmonize the national landscape with the national economy and the aspirational tastes of the middle class with the loyalty of the working poor to the fruits of their labors.

With the exception of Jia's *Still Life*, in contemporary urban film aesthetics there seems to be muted concern for the possible beauties of the Chinese landscape, and much more attention paid to the scruffiness, dilapidation, and filth inherent in the rapid urbanization and industrialization of China. Characters inhabit concrete prefabricated blocks, pink-tiled, landscaped, gated communities, or bleak tenements where the developer has used the standard latrine-like white tiling on the outside, while inside there is nothing but thin paint. But, if the landscape is an achieved visualization of national meaning, this is precisely why there is little actual difference between a mountain and a demolition site in *Still Life*, or benighted spots along the Suzhou river, or in a provincial beauty parlor as in other films of the past few years. All these spaces and views are clues to how land, class, and modernization move hand in hand in describing the current contingencies of the national soul.

Conclusion

The Chinese landscape is prey to the issue of moral quality (*suzhi*), which captures and defines the urban worker and the peasant, the new middle class and the failed migrant. It is urban and peri-urban, modern and ancient. It has an air of quality or degradation, both determined by class aspiration or despair. For everything here is fully human. Quality defines the landscape as much as it defines or refuses people. The legitimation of quality might be figured as the ability to encompass new China by not only surviving the new economy, but also by demonstrating a class-based capacity to evoke or embody cultural memory and the financial luck to define and meet contemporary standards of beauty, cleanliness, and safety. Quality is the ubiquitous stumbling block for those with hardly any power at all, the migrant, the landless, and the unskilled. The "new" filmic landscapes of urbanized trauma are stunningly affective—in that the concretized urban views and miniatures in city films suggest displaced and reinvented sensibilities of the moral landscape of the eighteenth century, in which miasmas of disease can be overwhelmed by large scale engineering works and ever larger populations. The moral landscape of China is laid out in the desolation of abandoned towns on the Three Gorges. The rural and semirural landscapes of Shanxi, Shaanxi, and Sichuan resonate in *Still Life* and *Yellow Earth* as spatial and temporal constitutions of the nation, of how and by whom it is occupied and managed. To rephrase Frisby: Few would dispute the connection between the delineation of the Chinese nation at the turn of the twenty-first century and the development of the denuded rural and urban landscapes of the Reform era.

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Notes

1. P. Kessler, *Oracle Bones: A Journey between China and the West* (London: John Murray Publishers, 2007), p. 3.

2. M. Elvin, *The Retreat of the Elephants: An Environmental History of China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 29.

3. On the connection between class and lifestyle enclaves, see sociological case studies in Mexico, Hong Kong, and China: L. F. Cabrales Barajas and E. Canosa Zamora, "Residential Segregation and Urban Fragmentation: Closed Neighborhoods in Guadalajara," *Espiral* 7 (2001): 223–253; T. W. Chan and T. L. Liu et al., "A Comparative Analysis of Social Mobility in Hong Kong," *European Sociological Review* 11 (1995): 135–155; L. Tomba, "Creating an Urban Middle Class: Social Engineering in Beijing," *China Journal* 82 (2004): 1–26.

4. Andrew Walder's arguments on elite mobility in the workplace might also apply to actual movement and relocation for lifestyle—see A. G. Walder, "Privatization and Elite Mobility: Rural China 1970–1996," Asia Pacific Research Center Working Paper (Stanford: Stanford University, 2002), p. 40. For class complexity see also A. Y. So, "The Changing Pattern of Classes and Class Conflict in China," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 33 (2003): 363–376; J. Wang, "Bourgeois Bohemians in China? Neo-tribes and the Urban Imaginary," *China Quarterly* 183 (2005): 532–548; J. Wang, "Youth Culture, Music, and Cell Phone Branding in China," *Global Media and Communication* 1 (2005): 185–201; A. G. Walder, "Social Dimensions of China's Economic Transition: Organization, Stratification, and Social Mobility," Asia Pacific Research Center Working Paper (Stanford: Stanford University, 2003): p. 40; S. Wang, D. Davis et al., "The Uneven Distribution of Cultural Capital: Book Reading in Urban China," *Modern China* 32 (2006): 315–348.

5. Y. J. Bian et al., "Occupation, Class, and Social Networks in China," *Social Forces* 8 (2005): 1443–1468.

6. D. Apter and T. Saich, *Revolutionary Discourse in Mao's Republic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 416.

7. D. S. G. Goodman, ed., *The New Rich in China: Future Rulers, Present Lives* (London: Routledge, 2008).

8. Wang, "Youth Culture, Music and Cell Phone Branding in China"; S. Wang and Z. Zhang, "The New Retail Economy of Shanghai," *Growth and Change* 36 (2005): 41–73.

9. V. Jaffee, "'Every Man a Star': The Ambivalent Cult of Amateur Art in New Chinese Documentaries," in *From Underground to Independent: Alternative Film Culture in Contemporary China*, ed. Y. J. Zhang and P.G. Pickowicz (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), p. 87.

10. M. Chew, "The Dual Consequences of Dual Localization: How Exposed Short Stockings Subvert and Sustain Global Cultural Hierarchy," *Positions—East Asia Cultures Critique* 11 (2003): 479–509.

11. Jaffee is also discussing Jia Zhangke—although not from the perspective of landscape.

12. Y. J. Zhang, "My Camera Doesn't Lie? Truth, Subjectivity, and Audience in Chinese Independent Film and Video," in *From Underground to Independent*, pp. 23–45.

13. S. Teo, "Cinema with an Accent: An Interview with Jia Zhangke, Director of *Platform*," *Senses of Cinema* 15 (2001), <http://archive.sensesofcinema.com/contents/01/15/zhangke_interview.html>, accessed August 10, 2010.

14. For a series of informative essays on this filmmaker, see Zhang Zhen, ed., *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

15. A. Nathan, "Authoritarian Resilience," *Journal of Democracy* 14 (2003): 6–17 (p. 13), quoted in E. J. Perry, "Studying Chinese Politics: Farewell to Revolution?" *China Journal* 57 (2007): 7. The full quote from Nathan is: "There is much other evidence from both quantitative and qualitative studies to suggest that expressions of dissatisfaction, including widely reported worker and peasant demonstrations, are usually directed at lower-level authorities, while the regime as a whole continues to enjoy high levels of acceptance."

16. E. J. Perry, *Patrolling the Revolution: Worker Militias, Citizenship, and the Modern Chinese State* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006.

17. J. K. Fairbank, *The United States and China*, 4th ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 449, quoted in E. J. Perry, "Studying Chinese Politics," p. 5.

18. S. Donald, "Landscape and Agency: *Yellow Earth* and the Demon Lover," *Theory, Culture, and Society* 14, 1 (1997): 97–112, p. 105.

19. Fairbank, *The United States and China*, p. 360.

20. S. Donald and Y. Zheng, "A Taste of Class: Manuals for Becoming Woman," in *Positions—East Asia Cultures Critique* 17, no. 3 (2009): 489–521.