Film and the Urban Contract

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THIS BOOK inquires into the relationship between city and film in the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Taiwan from 1949 to 2008—from the establishment of the People's Republic to the Beijing Olympics. China's cityscapes have transformed from drab rows of uniform housing to gentrified neighborhoods and glitzy malls—and from live museums of vernacular architecture to showcases for brand-name urban design. The urban change is the result of policies that abandoned Maoist economic planning in favor of capitalist globalization, yet the transformation is also part of a shift in visual practices. The cities' new looks, now made famous by broadcasts from the Olympics, result from novel observation practices, imaging technologies, and concepts of visualization. The visual media, and especially the stage and screen arts, have played a crucial role in shaping Chinese cities in the past sixty years.

Like many modern urbanists around the world, Chinese planners set out to build better cities to engineer better citizens. The task required complex networks and collaborations, forming what I call "the urban contract." This book details how this evolving contract resulted in redacting structure designs and city plans, redefining interior and public spaces, and reassessing the value of cultural heritage sites and contemporary political monuments. New visual practices have accompanied the material developments—stage plays and films display architectural models; filmmakers borrow imaging techniques from advertising; playwrights redefine the "fourth wall" and performance spaces; cameramen use photography as a form of preservation. Urban planning and the cinema have coalesced in creating new ways to represent lived space and imagine historical time.

The urban contract foregrounds the power structure underlying urbanist discourses and cinematic trends. This book, however, does not simply seek to present another account of art in the face of autocratic and ideological state control.[1] I devote much of this chapter to explaining the fraught relations between filmmakers and the government and to showing the limits of audiences' agency—there is no escaping the crass political aspects of power. Yet my fundamental concern in this book is the interplay of image, space, and temporality. I am interested in how the cinema has translated ideology into time capsules identified with specific sites, creating reified—indeed habitable—allegories of power.

The road I take is circuitous, weaving through analysis of urban history, urbanist debates, and government policy, following leads suggested by archival material and ethnographic research. These seeming diversions may baffle my fellow literary and film scholars—I, too, was surprised to find myself using the tools of disciplines in which I still consider myself a guest. However, such an approach is necessitated by the task of tracing a discourse that has redefined concepts such as public governance, planning professionalism, and cinematic vision—all at the same time.

As a historical study, the book offers a long-term perspective on urban cinema in China. From our present vantage point, it is tempting to focus on the post-Maoist reforms; yet it is important to trace the arc back to the early days of the People's Republic and the Republic of China (ROC) in Taiwan. Our story begins with a high-level meeting in 1950.

URBAN HISTORY REDUX

Films about the city are unlikely candidates for intrigue and clandestine dealings by heads of state. Yet a history of urban cinema in the People's Republic of China may start with an intimate meeting among some of the country's senior officials. On July 14, 1950, the premier and foreign minister, Zhou Enlai, hosted a dinner. Among the guests was Li Bozhao—one of the only women veterans of the Long March and the wife of Zhou's right-hand man Yang Shangkun, as well as the director of the newly established Beijing People's Art Theater (BPAT). The times were tense—that same day, the campaign to resist the U.S. invasion of Korea and Taiwan was formally launched, and Zhou would become increasingly busy securing Soviet support in the developing Korean crisis. Yet that evening he dedicated his atten-

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tion to a seemingly trifling matter. The evening's guest of honor was the novelist and playwright Lao She, and the premier discussed with him a plan to write a drama for Li Bozhao's theater about Longxugou, or Dragon Whisker Creek.[2] The Longxugou area, at the heart of Beijing's southern section, was undergoing extensive changes as part of efforts to facilitate worker mobility and transform the city into an industrial hub. The resulting piece by Lao She, *Dragon Whisker Creek*, was staged at BPAT, and a special performance was arranged at Huairentang Hall, inside the party leadership's compound at Zhongnanhai. Mao Zedong bestowed words of approval in person.[3] Lao She was rewarded with an appointment to the Beijing Municipal Government Council in 1951.[4] In 1952 the play was adapted into what became a film classic.

Official accounts of the making of *Dragon Whisker Creek* do not mention the meeting with Zhou Enlai. Even Lao She wove a different tale, claiming that he visited the formerly disaster-plagued site and was moved to write a play about its miraculous transformation.[5] Only when we cross Lao She's version with Li Bozhao's part in instigating the play, as detailed over thirty years later in the memoirs of the playwright's aide, and only by combining the two reports with the record of the premier's dinner with Lao She that same evening, do the political connections surface. The scant details about the conversation at Zhou's dinner table, supplemented by declassified memos of the Public Works Bureau, indicate that the play was an important tool for promoting urban redevelopment, complementing municipal and national policies.

Insofar as a stage play or film is defined through the joint efforts of all who produce and promote it, its "art world" (to borrow Howard Becker's term)[6] includes not only scriptwriters, filmmakers, distributors, censors, and critics, but also municipal- and state-level policymakers, professional planners, and—when their voice is heard—residents and grassroots activists. In the case of *Dragon Whisker Creek*, we should take into account the input of officials as high ranking as Mayor Peng Zhen and Premier Zhou Enlai, and of planners including the prominent architect Liang Sicheng and the head of the Public Works Bureau, Cao Yanxing (both Peng and Liang became Lao She's personal friends). *Dragon Whisker Creek* owes its ideological message, literary form, and very existence to the institutional structure within which it was produced.

Another privileged glimpse into the close management of the produc-

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tion's intended message is offered by a surviving playbill of the film's premiere. The release drew audiences by screening the film simultaneously in three locations: the Workers' Club as well as the Youhao (Friendship) and Jiefang (Liberation) theaters. The playbill includes a synopsis to be copied onto community blackboards as well as questions for discussion, the last of which reads: "Talk about the connection between *Dragon Whisker Creek* and today's democratic governance and establishing of a municipal government. How can they solve the most urgent problems of the working people?" The playbill reveals how officials hoped the film would influence public perception of policy.

Knowing the background for the production modifies our understanding of the relation between the cinema and the city. Rather than reflecting the existing urban conditions, *Dragon Whisker Creek* fudges historical facts, aggrandizes the role of the new government, assuages citizens' potential fears, fashions social organization as based on the vernacular architecture of the courtyard house, and idealizes the socialist city as a site of production. As this case shows, the city and the cinema are more than complementary manifestations of material structure and artistic imagination. They are also more than parallel spectacles of modern life. Rather, they play an active role in the imposition of government power, the formation of communities, the establishment of cultural norms, and the struggle for civil society. They are traces of the ongoing battle over the image of China's cities since 1949, which culminated in the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

I hope that this study offers a timely intervention. In my first book, *Witness against History*, I presented an alternative narrative of twentieth-century Chinese literature and film while engaging the post-Tiananmen debates on the "Chinese enlightenment." In this book I aim to participate in the discussions on how China's cities should grow. Many observers have noted the astounding growth of China's megacities and have argued that it is a key indicator of the evolvement of civil society and the processes of globalization.[7] Following the "spatial turn" in the late twentieth century, studies of urban culture have integrated geographical, architectural, and sociological insights. Few, however, have remarked on the role of visual culture in effecting urban transformation. The opening salvos in every wave of urban reform since 1949 have been fired through stage plays and films, not only because they are effective media but also because urban design must include cultural restructuring. The cinema has redefined the relation-

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ship linking the viewer, the screen, and the city as one between citizen, ideology, and political and economic power. Much more than a vehicle for forming individual and collective identities, film has provided a discursive framework for urban policies. Inquiring into the urban contract allows us to study how film has helped shape the city.

THE URBAN CONTRACT: MEDIATING POWER

The cinema is often described as exerting power over the audience, and film scholars have attempted to probe the minds of filmmakers and filmgoers to explain how that power unfolds. Studies describe the attraction of the spectacle, focusing on the moment of encounter between the screen and the viewer. The cinematic experience purportedly either divests the spectators of their judgment or awakens them as autonomous subjects; film is either overpowering or empowering. Such accounts give short shrift, however, to the larger social structure within which films are made, disseminated, interpreted, and acted on. The relationship between cinema and the city, as I explore it, stipulates that the spectator is not merely a gazing subject; nor is the city merely a given environment where films are shot and in which the cinema is present in the form of studios, theaters, boards, and screens. The city neither frames the viewer nor is itself framed by the cinematic gaze.

This study diverges from the prevalent emphasis on the apparatus of film exhibition and its manipulation of spectators' desires. The classical model assumes the conditions of a dark theater, an immobile spectator, and a single viewing. Anne Friedberg notes the limitations of these suppositions and argues that contemporary screen technology and culture extend spectatorship in time and space, yet Friedberg too defines the cinema primarily by the act of viewing.[8] For my purposes, imagining the cinema's impact through the viewer's ingenuous encounter with luminous images is inadequate. The behind-the-scenes details of *Dragon Whisker Creek* exemplify how spectatorship theory is belied by the exercise of power at every stage of production, distribution, and critical response. The filmic event is predicated on political, economic, and ideological forces that channel cinematic production and predispose the audience. The influence of the cinema derives not so much from any intrinsic force of the moving image as from mediating among these external sources of power.

Rather than probing into subjective experience, I look at how films help

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to forge a social contract for the city. Manuel Castells and Jordi Borja have used the term *urban contract* to call for "an integral policy" relying on the collaboration "between the government and the citizens, between the administration and companies, between public bodies and citizen associations."[9] Whereas Castells and Borja find in the urban contract a model for civil society, I use the term not to prescribe but rather to draw attention to a particular power structure. For good and ill, the authorities, nongovernmental institutions, and the media are all invested in constructing the city. Urban policy, in the broad sense used here, may be defined as measures for regulating the balance among three major players—the government (state and local), the developers (self-funded investors and hired contractors), and the residents (existing and potential). The tripartite relationship is subject to constant negotiation. Other agents mediate among these elements, within the constraints of their own power. The most visible intermediaries are professional planners, who may work for the government, act as consultants, or engage in independent activism. Other mediators include writers, journalists, scholars, advertisers—and filmmakers. This book primarily addresses the cinema's mediation between different visions of the city.

Film and drama occupy a position similar to that of urban planning, as go-betweens in a high-stakes game of political and economic power. Filmmakers and playwrights confront the same obstacles that architects know as "planning in the face of power," the need to think professionally and act politically at the same time.[10] Filmmaking in the face of power—or rather, in the midst of the power structure—is at the heart of Chinese urbanism.

URBAN FILM IN A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

As a historical study, this book traces the symbiosis between film, drama, and Chinese cities since 1949. Although I focus on cinema, theatrical performances have also taken part in the interaction, especially since plays were often staged (and then typically modified and restaged) in preparation for, or in lieu of, film productions more costly in time and money. To symbolize the New China, cities not only had to be physically remolded, but their new image also needed to be disseminated and interpreted through plays and movies. The cinema was part of a larger experiment by the socialist state, aimed at producing new spatial practices. Screen and stage productions

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rallied popular support for urbanization plans. Since the dominant ideology was communism, the productions may be said to have *painted the city red*. Later films have carved out a space for criticism but continue to contribute to the discourse on urban policy.

The inevitable ideological coloring notwithstanding, I am not interested in turning the urbanist debates into exemplars of state oppression and heroic dissent. Admittedly, vested interest, hubris, and folly resulted in less livable cities and less viable urban growth. Legislation decreeing demolition-and-relocation has favored powerful developers over low-income residents, and cultural amnesia over historic preservation. Yet even though these concerns are uniquely manifest in Chinese cities, they are not unique to China. Tom Campanella, although highly critical of post-Maoist hyperurbanization, shows similar cases of bias and misjudgment in urban planning around the world.[11] Arguably unparalleled in China are filmmakers' and playwrights' attention to and involvement in details of urban policy.

A historical perspective allows us to discern shifting nuances in the cinematic intervention in urbanism. Both the aims and the means of policy —often hard to distinguish from each other—have changed over the decades, from facilitating state power to establishing sustainable communities, from channeling industrial growth to creating viable financial centers, from promoting ideological strongholds to preserving cultural assets. Interacting with the intended and unintended effects of policy, films have touched on every element of urban design. They have depicted the laying of sewage pipes and presented citywide plans; shown how houses are assigned and encouraged the redistribution of industry; made the case for historic preservation and celebrated the real estate market.

To investigate both trends and particularities, I rely on close readings and general discourse analysis of about 150 films and plays. To trace tangible connections between the cultural productions, professional plans, and political decisions, I draw not only on the texts but also on archival documents, including correspondence among municipal planners and memos of consultations within Communist Party units. In addition, I interviewed more than forty playwrights, theater professionals, film directors, planners, residents, journalists, and public intellectuals especially for this book. These exchanges have provided behind-the-scenes details such as changes to scripts and stage sets, meetings at the censors' board, neighborhood com-

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mittee dynamics, and unreported protests by residents.[12] The passion and generosity of all those involved in sharing their experiences attest to the importance if not urgency that they ascribe to China's urban vision.

The result is a corrective history of Chinese urban cinema, with emphasis on its historical roots. The popularity and critical acclaim of Sixth Generation filmmakers and the New Taiwan Cinema, deserved as they are, are also misguided in stressing the trends' novelty. After the demise of Maoism (and the concurrent dismantling of the Chiangs' rule in Taiwan), films have helped change official policy and reinterpret city space. Yet the challenge of post-Maoist and post-Chiang cinemas lies largely in their reaction to the established images of state productions, harking back to *Dragon Whisker Creek* and other works. Moreover, both early PRC drama and film and less cutting-edge contemporary works have their rewards. The appeal of experimental and adversarial forms has drawn scholarly attention away from the fine scriptwriting, acting, and camera work that can be found in conservative and even propagandistic plays and films. A historical perspective is rendered even more necessary by the recent groundbreaking scholarship on contemporary urban culture and film, in particular Zhang Zhen's *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century* and Robin Visser's *Cities Surround the Countryside: Urban Aesthetics in Post-socialist China*. Visser argues persuasively that a new urban consciousness arose in the 1990s, so that "the city became a subject in its own right." Urbanism became the object of display, the topic of public debate, and the subject matter of sociopolitical scholarship.[13] In 2008, China Film Press published two monographs on urban cinema. Chu Weihua focuses on the evolving role of the urban citizen in Chinese films and catalogues the thematic concerns throughout the twentieth century. Chen Xiaoyun notes the ideological implications of depicting everyday urban existence in recent movies on perceptions of space and the body.[14] The current surge of interest in Chinese urbanism and Urban Cinema might obfuscate their roots in earlier discourses.

Studies of contemporary urbanism symptomatically limit their inquiry to the construction of new "urban aesthetics," "urban consciousness," and "urban identity," distinguishing between "how the city *is imagined*" and "its materiality."[15] Attention to the Maoist period, when the state played a key role in both envisioning the city and constructing it, gives the lie to this distinction. In film in particular, urban subject matter has been a consistent

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concern since 1949, even through the period dominated by Fifth Generation directors and their purported focus on the rural environment. To regard urban films as breaking free from Maoist and Fifth Generation aesthetics—and perhaps returning to the golden days of prewar Shanghai cinema—ignores underlying continuities across periods and sites.[16] John Friedman notes that "adopting globalization as the analytical framework for the study of cities tends to privilege outside forces to the neglect of internal visions, historical trajectories, and endogenous capabilities. It also places emphasis on economics to the exclusion of sociocultural and political variables."[17] The same observations are valid for the study of urban film.

BEYOND THE URBAN AND CINEMATIC SUBLIME

Coming to terms with film's role in the urban contract calls also for rethinking the function of the cinema in urban modernity. The scholar's instinct, when dealing with these issues, is to reach for the arsenal derived from the writings of Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin. Observing the bourgeoisie of the Weimar Republic, Kracauer concluded that the new urban environment caused ennui, which younger people alleviated through escapist entertainment, including the cinema.[18] Inspired in part by Kracauer's criticism of the modern city, Benjamin developed a theory of urban experience. Benjamin (following Charles Baudelaire) identifies the modern experience in the contact with the city crowd. Benjamin's "experience" (*Erfahrung*), whether in relation to the city or to film, is predicated on a first-hand encounter (*Erlebnis*). This reliance on subjective contact delimits and strains institutional analysis.

In view of Benjamin's influence, and for readers interested in related debates, it is worth noting in detail Benjamin's reliance on a Kantian notion of the subject—an autonomous, self-aware participant who contributes to a greater consciousness. Benjamin's focus on the subjective reaction to the urban environment is motivated by his wish to update Kantian epistemology, an effort he began already with his 1918 essay, "The Program of the Coming Philosophy."[19] He achieved this program two decades later in his study of nineteenth-century Paris, which explores the effects of placing the Kantian subject among the buildings and crowds of the city. Whereas Kant finds the reaffirmation of the subject in the encounter with the sublime, Benjamin locates a similar moment, grounded in historical materialism, in

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the urban experience. The Kantian "respect" (*Achtung*)—the figure of fear that partially revokes judgment only to reassert the observer's subjectivity—is transmogrified into Benjamin's "series of shocks and collisions" while moving in traffic, which numbs individuals but can also enhance their consciousness. The experience of the street is described in terms reminiscent of the Kantian dynamic sublime: "Fear, revulsion, and horror were the emotions which the big-city crowd aroused in those who first observed it." A similar experience, according to Benjamin, occurs when watching moving pictures, an endless succession of shocks, twenty-four frames per second: "In a film, perception conditioned by shock was established as a formal principle." In resisting the instinctive urge to repress the shock, the subject avoids being "cheated out of his experience."[20] The city and the cinema are catalysts in Benjamin's Kantian experiment.

Even though Benjamin places Kantian epistemology within a materialist framework, his view of the city and the cinema is remarkably dependent on the individual psyche. Benjamin grounds his thesis in philosophical reasoning rather than in empirical observation, continuing the search for human transcendence over materiality that has obsessed Kantian philosophers. For Benjamin, subjects who recognize themselves in the crowd achieve nothing short of the awakening of their historical consciousness. Benjamin famously acknowledges the role of urban planning (notably through the figure of Georges-Eugène Haussmann, the designer of Paris's boulevards) and of visual renditions of the city (such as the photographs of Félix Nadar, who documented Haussmann's projects). Yet for Benjamin, the streets and moving images are ready-made stimuli, the prerequisites to a chain of events that starts with the encounter and results in the self-affirmation of the subject. The neo-Kantian project sees the city and the cinema as spectacles offered for the subject's sensibilities, impervious to the flows of power.

In the Chinese context, Benjamin's terms resurface in Yingjin Zhang's *The City in Modern Chinese Literature and Film*. Zhang regards "the city as a site of cultural production," which leads him to inquire into "how the city is perceived and imagined," "recollected," and "reconstructed."[21] The city, described in the passive voice, remains a given entity. Many subsequent readings, including some of my earlier essays, focus on subjective alienation and consumer culture, disregarding the ties between urban culture and policy.[22] "Urban culture" is widely used as shorthand for urban *commodity* culture, fetishizing the everyday and marginalizing urbanist discourse.

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The impetus behind the inquiry into cinema and urban culture remains important in that it asks what spheres outside film production and reception help define the cinema. A growing number of studies acknowledge how other cultural fields border and interpenetrate filmmaking to the point of changing the social functions, latitude of action, and even physical media of what is understood as cinematic. Yet analysis of "urban culture" tends to stay at the level of the individual subject, a hero surviving in an alienating environment. Film studies too often glorify the individual who sublimates sensorial stimuli. Scholars such as Giuliana Bruno and Tom Gunning have compared the early filmgoer to the paragon of Benjaminian subjectivity, the flâneur.[23] Studies of many hues have focused on subjective reaction. Laura Mulvey investigates how the spectator is called on to identify with the film's dominating ideology. David Bordwell looks for the cognitive formula through which the spectator processes visual stimuli. Steven Shaviro asks whether it is an optical or more corporeal experience. And insofar as the spectator's reactions should be historicized, Miriam Hansen inquires what modes of perception are precipitated by the cinema as a modern technology of observation.[24] These questions look for answers in the human psyche rather than in systemic structures. The Kantian inquiry into the sublime has persisted in the repeated question of whether urban film culture overwhelms the subject and plays into the hands of an oppressive social system or resists and sublimates conforming structures.

The neo-Kantian emphasis on subjective experience leads to another problematic assertion, namely, that the cinema can create an alternative public sphere. Inspired by Oskar Negt's and Alexander Kluge's argument for multiple, potentially counterhegemonic public spheres, Miriam Hansen finds in early screening locations "an alternative . . . organization of experience" and argues that "early cinema . . . provided the formal conditions for an alternative public sphere, a structural possibility of articulating experience in a communicative, relatively autonomous form." Zhang Zhen makes a similar claim in the Chinese context, proposing that "the experience of film becomes deeply enmeshed in the metropolitan experience as a whole" and that cinema in early twentieth-century Shanghai "helped forge a new human sensorium . . . against the dehumanizing effects of industrial capitalism and colonialism."[25] Hansen's and Zhang's interest in "the cinematic experience" as the seed for subjective transformation dovetails with Benjamin's quest for emancipatory elements in modern culture. Yet in celebrating vernacular culture, the body, and affect as sites of alternative significa-

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tion, scholars might slight the warnings of Michel Foucault and Antonio Gramsci that self-expression and resistance are co-opted into the hegemonic structure. As I have argued elsewhere, there is no reason to believe that the public sphere is transparent or committed to the common good.[26] Film studios, critics, and advocacy groups have been infamously reluctant to let the audience form its independent impressions. Audiences often go into the theater with clear knowledge of what they are going to think of the film, and opinions outside of the mainstream are stifled. Hollywood in particular has thrived on giving moviegoers the illusion that they patronize socially engaged films.[27] Not only is there a dearth of evidence that the cinema creates an alternative consciousness; existing data also point to the pervasive and effective manipulation of spectators by interested parties. Deliberate and sometimes forced policies may override individual perception.

The filmgoer is neither an autonomous subject nor an entrepreneurial agent. Spectators, rather, are regulated subjects, subsumed by the structure of the urban contract; they are Foucauldian "subjects of discourse" rather than autonomous entities.[28] The urban citizen does not discover identity through cinematic experience; on the contrary, films actively promote an ideological mold that forms the citizen. Insofar as the cinema provides a "horizon for the experience of modernization and modernity," as Miriam Hansen contends, it is a horizon that is often receding rather than expanding, and an experience that is at least as institutionally imposed as it is subjectively generated.

Even to the extent that Hansen and Zhang offer valid observations on early cinema, 1949 marks the emergence of new urban and cinematic discourses in China. City governance was identified with caring for the nation's well-being, and the cinema was subjected to heavy-handed political intervention. Film production and reception included directors conferencing with state ministers, scriptwriters working under Party fiat, and audiences primed by campaigns. The urban policies and cinematic practices in the PRC and Taiwan since 1949 cannot be contained within the dynamics of spectatorship.[29]

To move beyond questions of subjective experience—that is, beyond the urban and cinematic sublime—we must reconsider the relationship between the citizen, the city, and the cinema. Mark Shiel notes that to understand the cinema as an active agent we must resist the classical Marxist model of economic base and ideological superstructure, with its "reifying

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tendency to speak of cinema simply in terms of the text and its reflection of urban and social change 'on the ground.'" Shiel calls for "a sociology of the cinema . . . with specific focus on the role of cinema in the physical, social, cultural, and economic development of cities."[30] To this challenge we may add the need to acknowledge the importance of policy and planning. The city's social functions are prefigured by power relations, and film studies should also address the institutional context provided by the urban contract.

James Hay further interlinks the cinema and the city: "Film's role in maintaining and modifying social relations has to do both with how it becomes part of an environment and how it enables or constrains navigation of that landscape."[31] In other words, the cinema produces the social dimension of space, by dint of its mere presence and as an active force. Yet Hay makes a more provocative observation: film is "dispersed within an *environment* of sites that *defines* (in spatial terms) the meanings, uses and place of 'the cinematic.'"[32] To extrapolate from this statement, the cinema's distinct attributes include its existence in space and demarcation of space, and "the cinematic," often shrouded in the mystique of subjective feelings, arises in fact from discourses of power.

Key thinkers on urban modernity, from Kracauer and Benjamin to Michel de Certeau and David Harvey, have bequeathed the following questions: How does urban technology account for the formation of the modern subject? What is the role of visual culture in transforming modern identity? I suggest that these questions may be reversed: What ideological formations enable the new material environment? What institutional changes and social contracts privilege visual expression, and the cinema in particular? It is not the city that gives rise to movies; the cinema is not even merely the continuation of the city by other means, as David Clarke proposes.[33] It is rather films—in direct interaction with political decisions and architectural blueprints—that forge an urban contract and create the material city and its ideological constructs.

PROPAGANDA: FILM IN LONG DURATION

The epistemology of the cinema, defined by the encounter between spectator and ready-made artifact, presumes not only the autonomous subjectivity of the spectator but also the uniqueness of the projected image. Too much hinges on speculating about the moment of sitting in the film theater as a singular event, as if it were a temporal rupture that transforms the specta-

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tors' consciousness. It is useful to think of the films examined here not as events confined to the time and place of their screening but rather as long-duration historical processes. The encounter between the film and the audience is often prescribed, monitored in real time, and rewritten after the fact. In other words, films have been marketed and consumed as propaganda products.

Many critics have targeted propaganda films as anathema to the spectators' agency—an understandable view given formulations such as Sergei Eisenstein's call for the cinema to "plough [the audience's] psyche."[34] Propaganda is perceived as a menace to faithful representation and the robber of subjective experience—whether in André Bazin's discussion of Stalin films as mythmaking and a distortion of history, in Jacques Ellul's view of mass media as a technique that renders social manipulation imperceptible, or in Jean Baudrillard's mention, in the same breath, of the October Revolution and advertisement as related forms of marketing, be it of ideas or commodities.[35] After discarding the quest for mimesis and recognizing the inevitability of a mediatized world, propaganda has remained the last straw man to beat in defending reality from the simulacrum.

The political system in the PRC adds an unsavory dimension to propaganda, but the utility of film deserves more evenhanded scrutiny. Vying for the power to represent and shape the city has often resulted in the overwhelming influence of the government over the cinema and of the cinema over the citizen. Yet we should not dismiss the films at hand as mere tools of totalitarian control. Few filmmakers are blind followers of doctrine—or, for that matter, indomitable freedom fighters. Insofar as filmmaking is on a par with urban planning, as a form of negotiation with power, it needs to constantly redefine its relation to current politics. Fashioning films as either tools of oppression or vehicles for individual and collective awakening ignores the position of the cinema as an intermediary between centers of power.

Propaganda has acquired a bad name among critics for its resistance to systems of meaning that leave space for multiple interpretations. Cultural criticism has largely focused on eliciting concealed and repressed signs and values. Yet the joy of unearthing the collective desires in what Fredric Jameson calls "conspiratorial texts"[36] is thwarted by propaganda works that lay claim to total representation: all that should be expressed has already been

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expressed. I have analyzed elsewhere the Maoist insistence on the proper transmission of doctrine, to the point of foreclosing multiple decodings.[37] Postulating the existence of a "political unconscious" requires a better understanding of the abjective conscious that proscribes it.

In other words, the study of propaganda is not only necessitated by the subject matter of this book, it is also important for resituating film within the structure of the urban contract. Propaganda, like genre conventions, develops over time and in response to the producers' changing needs. Rick Altman observes that the discourse on genre evolves to suit the interests of studios, critics, and distributors.[38] Likewise, we must look at propaganda productions not only diachronically but also synchronically—that is, not as endless repetition of dogma but rather as context-sensitive iterations of contemporary policies.[39] Paradoxically, it is the time-sensitive nature of propaganda that requires its analysis as a long-duration process.

FILMMAKING AND THE NEGOTIATION WITH POWER

In outlining the shifting relationship of the cinema to seats of power, this book may be divided schematically into two halves. The first (the first three and a half chapters) deals with plays and films instigated by the PRC government and demonstrates the immediate stakes for urban policy in state propaganda. The second half of the book is devoted to filmmaking outside the official PRC production system and in post-Chiang Taiwan and examines how film promotes alternative urban visions. This division does not amount to distinguishing between selling out and political dissidence. Rather, all filmmakers—whether in the service of policymakers or independent of the state—renegotiate the urban contract and their position in between the government, developers, and residents.

Urban policy in China may be characterized as aiming to facilitate the government's regulatory powers, augment its prestige, and increase its capital (typically in land value). These goals can be achieved by redistributing the government's resources, mostly land and built property (used for infrastructure, recreational grounds, housing, public buildings, state monuments, industry, and land reserves) and liquid funds (the government's, developers', and citizens'). As this book illustrates, films and plays have emphasized various aspects of shifting resources around—housing reassignment (see

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especially chapters 1, 3, 5, and 6); setting aside public spaces (see chapters 1, 2, 4, 5, and 7); the relocation of urban industry (chapters 1 and 2); and the mobilization of private capital (chapters 2, 3, and 7).

The Maoist control of production, distribution, and critical response—which continues in some forms even today—has severely restricted PRC theater and cinema (much more than its literature and visual arts). In certain cases, the brush with power was unmediated and brusque. I have already mentioned Zhou Enlai's and Mao Zedong's personal interest in *Dragon Whisker Creek*. *Sentinels under the Neon Lights*, as I show in chapter 2, involved not only the national leadership but also every echelon of the military and the Propaganda Bureau. Even in Deng Xiaoping's reform era and beyond, official supervision and the "concern" of leaders have required filmmakers to negotiate with the state to approve the productions. Censorship has played a major role—exercised during preproduction by film studios and during postproduction by the central government (formerly by the Ministry of Culture and since 1986 by the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television—SARFT). For example, as I discuss in chapter 6, specific shots are excised from films to present a more favorable image of the city. Content can also be foisted on scriptwriters; I give notable illustrations of such situations in chapter 3, showing the influence of BPAT's party secretary in the choice of repertoire.

In other cases, the regulation does not take an adversarial form but relies on the prescriptive distribution of desired topics. During the Maoist period in particular, the "planning of subject matter" (*ticai guihua*) delineated a normative range and shaped popular taste. City life was symptomatically absent from the officially designated categories. Urban issues were addressed through the ideological prism of topics such as "the PLA protects and constructs the motherland" or "adaptations of literary masterpieces."

The cinema shares the plight of urban design, which is subjected to a double-tier centralized control—state-level "economic planning" (*jingji jihua*, handled after the Soviet model by the State Planning Commission) as well as municipal-level spatial planning (*chengshi guihua*, literally "urban planning," under the Ministry of Construction).[40] An exceptionally candid, albeit schematic, cinematic portrayal of architects' work in Maoist China is found in *The Footsteps of Youth* (1957). The film addresses the new charge of the Ministry of Construction and Engineering to plan new cities; the opening shots show a city in the process of accelerated construction. A couple of

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sweethearts, young architects working in the same planning office, participate in a competition to design a workers' dormitory. The woman ends up on top after having an affair with the section chief. The woman's blueprint, based on the section chief's suggestions, excels in integrating the floor plan and the exterior design. The young man's draft, in contrast, is superior in considering the workers' practical needs. (The contrast reflects a debate on aesthetics and functionalism in architecture that raged in the 1950s.)[41] Once the woman's affair with the elder cadre is revealed, the betrayed young man volunteers for labor reform in Qinghai, while the remorseful woman stays behind. The film shows not only the battle between two different approaches to planning—the purely aesthetic and the class-conscious—but also the planners' ulterior motives and self-interest as well as the superiors' intervention and bias. (Another description of urban planners' work is found in *Neighbors* [1981], which I discuss in detail in chapter 6). Moreover, *The Footsteps of Youth* presents the architects' work and interpersonal relations as expressions of the ideological challenges in the New China. This portrayal of architects as embroiled in complex political, economic, and social structures—akin to that in *The Fountainhead* (1949)—may also illustrate how playwrights and filmmakers have been scrutinized when they mediate between the powerful elements involved in urban policy.

Within a few years after the demise of Chiang Kai-shek in 1975 and of Mao Zedong in 1976, independent film production in Taiwan and the PRC was thriving. Movies questioned the official discourse and fueled public debates over urban policy. In chapter 5 I detail the most overt of these interventions, made possible by the political atmosphere in Taiwan. Grassroots protest (including amateur filmmaking) has destabilized political power in Taiwan, to the point that academics at the Institute of Building and Planning were in a position to negotiate with Taipei's mayor, Ma Ying-jeou, against the evacuation of the slum at Baozangyan. I include Taiwan, although it has been separated from the mainland for most of the period since 1895 and governed by a different system, to show how Taipei films also are deeply imbricated in policy issues. Just as enthusiasm for Urban Cinema in the PRC since the late 1980s has obscured the concrete considerations of politicians, developers, and residents, so did the critical reception of New Taiwan Cinema ignore institutional dynamics. Directors such as Tsai Ming-liang, Edward Yang, and Lin Cheng-sheng not only pay tribute to Taipei locations but also participate in a dialogue with policymakers, planners, and activists.

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The power balance in post-Maoist PRC has been more subtle. Since the mid-1980s, and especially since the rise of independent, so-called Sixth Generation filmmakers in the mid-1990s, urban subject matter has been associated with a critical view of social change. Yet post-Maoist cinema is more reluctant to address the systemic reasons for city trouble. Moreover, as Yingjin Zhang remarks, Sixth Generation directors have enjoyed an "institutionally imposed but self-glorified status of marginality."[42] Urban Cinema was lionized as a form of dissidence, even after it had become part of the commercial mainstream. The rise of New Urban Cinema, a genre of wide appeal, in the late 1990s signaled a shift to more commercial production, in the phrase of Paul Pickowicz and Yingjin Zhang, "from underground to independent."[43] In fact, New Urban Cinema is a good test case for the collusion of state capitalism and the new culture of commodified leisure. Filmmaking in the face of power has always entailed compromise, minding the powerful participants in the urban contract.

SITES OF IDEOLOGY: CHAPTER OUTLINE

To foreground the shifting power relations in the urban contract, I have arranged this book around particular locations and architectural forms that promoted tailored accounts of the city. Ideological constructs, and especially historical narratives, were reified through geographical sites. I refer to the coupling of specific locations and temporal perceptions as *chronotopes*, a term coined by Mikhail Bakhtin for the imaginary place and time frames that forge fictional realms.[44] Bakhtin was concerned with hermetic fictional worlds unrelated to any concrete location or period, yet the cases before us depict real places, forcing the spectators to interpret the films in the factual and symbolic registers at the same time.[45] The chapter layout follows these sites.

Chapter 1 looks at Longxugou, a Beijing slum, and its redevelopment into a more prosperous neighborhood in the early 1950s. Unlike the following chapters, chapter 1 looks at a single work, albeit in two forms: the play and film versions of *Dragon Whisker Creek* (1951 and 1952, respectively). *Dragon Whisker Creek* has given special significance to Beijing's Outer City (*waicheng*), also known as the city's southern quarters (*chengnan*). The Outer City was walled in 1564 and designated for those who serviced the imperial court and its retinues in the Inner City. As a proletarian district, the Outer City was touted by the Communist government as embodying the true spirit

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of Beijing. *Dragon Whisker Creek* focuses on a courtyard compound (*zayuan'r*) as a microcosm of society and of class struggle in particular. The most important contribution of *Dragon Whisker Creek* to urban discourse is what I call its *prescriptive chronotope*. Written and performed even before the completion of the public works it describes, the play projects onto the present an ideal version of the future. All existence is defined as either spent in anticipation of communism or already enjoying the bliss of socialist urbanization. Communist utopia is manifested in developing the Outer City and integrating the intimate compound into the large public spaces of the state.

In chapter 2 we turn to the Shanghai landmark of Nanjing Road. Nanjing Road was the city's commercial center since Shanghai's colonial occupation in 1842. It stretched between two other symbols of colonial power, namely, the waterfront Bund and the Horse Race Club. The Communist takeover in 1949 resulted not only in the physical transformation of the site—most noticeably in turning the Horse Race Club into People's Park, People's Avenue, and People's Square—but also in redistributing the city's economic power from the center to new satellite towns and from the service sector to heavy industry. The policy—expressed blatantly in the 1963 campaign to "emulate the Good Eighth Company of Nanjing Road"—was accompanied by portrayals of the city as a shelter for counterrevolutionaries. Films such as *A Married Couple* (1951) and *Sentinels under the Neon Lights* (1964) present Nanjing Road as the location of a *recidivist chronotope*. Communist cadres and soldiers settling on the road become entangled in revisionist heresy, and it is the task of the Party to save them and the city. The portrayal of Nanjing Road as a site of decadence and corruption amplified the stereotypes, established before 1949, to change the image of postliberation Shanghai. The films discussed in chapter 2 illustrate the cinema's involvement in urban policy at the apex of the Maoist period.

Chapter 3 surveys more than a dozen plays staged since 1980, mostly set in Beijing's traditional courtyard houses (*siheyuan'r*), dilapidated and designated for demolition. The distinct architecture of the courtyard houses, together with the narrow alleys (*hutong*) along which they were built, has increasingly given way to wide roads and apartment buildings. The plays, sponsored by state theaters on the occasion of launching new policies, invariably side with the developers, show the need to tear down the old houses, and argue for ways of preserving Beijing's cultural heritage that focus on external appearance. The plays often refer explicitly to *Dragon Whisker Creek*

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and further develop the prescriptive chronotope already found in Lao She's play, anticipating a better future in modern housing. In addition, the theater productions present redevelopment as an overnight transformation that skirts the social problems arising from the intermediate phase of evacuation and relocation. The courtyard plays subscribe to a *chronotope of instantaneity*, which telescopes historical processes and presents a ready-made new city poised to take part in the global economy.

Although this lengthy chapter deals exclusively with stage plays, its argument is also relevant for discussing cinema. The theater pieces can be produced more quickly than films and are tightly controlled by the Propaganda Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party. (This Party organization and SARFT, which supervises film production, are the strictest and most conservative censoring bodies, making drama and cinema most indicative of government policy.) In their capacity as testing ground for the mass media, the stage plays are the first to establish tropes and visual symbols that find their ways into films. Practically every Maoist film mentioned in this book was preceded by a theatrical version. Even in recent years, many screen actors, playwrights, and directors started their careers at the Central Academy of Drama and on the stage. The courtyard plays in particular evidence the crossover between the genres.

Chapter 4 examines Tiananmen Square, the most ostentatious of the public spaces identified with the Chinese state. Whereas the previous chapters depict a fragile partnership between state power and artistic creativity, Tiananmen casts the authorities and the filmmakers in sharp contrast. Ironically, this architectural emblem of the state has been more easily reappropriated for alternative visions of the city than the intimate residential spaces discussed in chapters 1 and 3, precisely because Tiananmen has been established as a public space. Formerly a vestibule to the emperor's seat in the Forbidden City, the square was redesigned in the 1950s as a gathering place for rallies as well as the center of government. The cinema adds to the site's symbolic significance by referring back to the images recorded at the founding ceremony of the PRC and distributed in the documentary *The Birth of New China* (1949). As the distilled expression of the Communist revolution, the founding ceremony was reenacted in the docudrama *The Founding Ceremony* (*kaiguo dadian*, 1989). The purported immutability of the square is borne out in what I call the *chronotope of perpetual revolution*, which locks the site in time, covering up for the many changes that have in fact taken place

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in the square itself and in its relation to the urban layout. Planners in the service of the national and municipal governments fashioned the new Tiananmen as a symbolic break with the imperial city plan but at the same time reintegrated the square into old monumental spaces, suggesting that the site was impervious to historic change. In the post-Maoist period, however, movies challenged the square's self-contained design as a symbol of the state, separated from the surrounding urban context. Instead, films showed the square as part of city life. The most salient example is the documentary *The Square* (1994), which presents the place as a site of leisure, akin to New York's Central Park. Against the chronotope of perpetual revolution, recent films have foregrounded alternative spatial and temporal matrices of interpreting Tiananmen's place in the city.

Chapter 5 evidences how urban cinema can give the lie to official accounts of urban development. I focus on films depicting Taipei's veterans' villages (*juancun*), architectural residues of Taiwan's de facto secession from mainland China in 1949. The villages, in actuality large communities embedded in the urban fabric since the early 1950s, housed military personnel, retirees, and their families. As part of Taipei's gentrification since the early 1980s, the veterans' villages were demolished, often replaced with public parks. The inhabitants of those villages built on military property were peacefully relocated; the residents of other villages, overgrown slums of makeshift houses, had no means to sustain themselves outside their original abodes and mounted violent protests. Films such as *Moonlight* (1983) and *My Whispering Plan* (2002) linger on the collapse of familial structures as a result of demolition. Other works, such as *Vive l'Amour* (1994) and *Robinson's Crusoe* (2002), present the city as a palimpsest of coexisting temporalities. The *chronotope of simultaneity* in Taipei cinema collapses the city's history and makes past, present, and future visible at the same time through the camera lens.

Different circumstances notwithstanding, there are common roots to urban policy issues and present challenges in Taiwan and the PRC. In both cases, urban housing projects in the early 1950s were part of a national agenda to take care of the new government's support base, just as films were mobilized for nation building. On both sides of the Taiwan Strait, planners inherited the problems created by those short-term housing solutions and were drawn to authoritarian interpretations of land-use laws. Rapid rezoning, confiscation, and construction were enabled by state and municipal

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agencies' ownership of developed land; at the same time, concern for historic conservation and the cities' symbolic significance presented particular challenges. As both the PRC and Taiwan experienced a spectacular surge in urbanization in the aftermath of political changes in the late 1970s, demolition-and-relocation became prevalent. In the 1980s, Taiwanese activists and filmmakers protested against erasing the city's past, in voices emulated in the PRC since the mid-1990s.

The cinematic treatment of demolition-and-relocation is also the subject of chapter 6, which deals with PRC films since 1980. I discuss the rise of Urban Cinema in the 1980s and New Urban Cinema since the 1990s. Exponents such as *Black Snow* (1990), *Weekend Lover* (1993), and *Good Morning, Beijing* (2000) show how urban films withdrew to an intense concern for the individual subject, divorced from the context of urban policy. The chapter focuses, however, on films that resonate and engage with the growing professional and public interest in protecting the urban environment, at least by preserving its image on film. Demolition sites are seen as architectural open wounds and as evidence of a traumatized urban fabric. By recording these sites, films become repositories of the city's memory. To match the planners' attention to preservation, films chronicle the vanishing city. As markers of disappearance, demolition sites as shooting locations mark a *preservational chronotope*—acknowledging a sense of loss and recognizing the need for keeping a record of the expired architecture. The preservational chronotope is manifested in a documentary impulse to grab the moment in visual form. To varying degrees of explicitness, the filmmaker becomes the protagonist of the cinematic attempt to keep snapshots of the city in its present condition.

The documentary impulse is found in films from before and after 1989, in various genres, and spread over many cities and locations. The films may be overtly nostalgic, like *Sunset Street* (1983) and *Farewell My Concubine* (1992); they can expose personal traumas, as in *No Regret about Youth* (1992) and *Baober in Love* (2004); they sometimes experiment with new forms of realism, like *Neighbors* (1981) and Ning Ying's Beijing trilogy (1992–2000); they are likely to foreground the presence of the amateur camera, like *Shower* (1999) and *Suzhou River* (2000). The plot may follow the evacuation of a traditional courtyard house, as in *Love in the Internet Age* (1999); dorms at a communal corridor building (*tongzilou*), as in *Strangers in Beijing* (1996); a modified courtyard house, as in *A Tree in House* (2000); or a market stall, as in

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Life Show (2000). In these and other cases, the cinema may be unable to change the course of urban development, but it can fill in for the absence of open debate by presenting the results of policy in relatively candid terms.

Chapter 7 concludes the book by considering Beijing's booming real estate market as the city joined the global economy and geared up for the 2008 Olympics. Two films I discuss stretch the limits of what may be put up for sale—in *Big Shot's Funeral* (2001), the Forbidden City is fashioned as advertising space; in *The World* (2004), one can buy access to the entire planet, at least in the form of amusement park replicas. With the subjugation of architectural heritage to market economy and the compromising of urban planning to the whims of transnational capital, space ceases to reference concrete places. The cinema presents a *postspatial chronotope*—a virtual time/space framework that challenges the very possibility of constructing the city, except in the cinematic imagination and in postcinematic technologies of virtual reality.

SITES OF CINEMA

The sites introduced in this book can hardly represent all aspects of Chinese urbanization, or even all major locations. I focus on Beijing, Shanghai, and Taipei due to the prodigious number of films made in these cities and because the large cinematic oeuvre reflects their prominence as political centers and cultural hubs. These three cities provide poignant examples of planning and filmmaking in the face of power. Even though the recent astounding growth of inland metropolises (notably, Chongqing Municipality, now at about 34 million inhabitants) has captured the headlines, the three cities examined here, with their rich architectural heritage, vibrant art scenes, and political clout, provide the testing grounds for integrating national, cultural, and urban policies. In the PRC, Beijing and Shanghai serve as models for other municipalities. The transformation of Beijing's *hutong* and Shanghai's *longtang* into modern commercial centers is arguably no more dramatic or important than the destruction of, say, Kashgar's old streets, but the gentrification of all Chinese cities mimics projects such as Beijing's Oriental Plaza and Shanghai's Xintiandi (*xintiandi* is now also used as a verb, in the sense of creating a hip commercial center with an architectural heritage flavor). That urban policy has been portrayed in films only concerning a small number of cities, with Beijing at the top and even

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Shanghai a distant second, points to the privileged place of Beijing and Shanghai in the PRC, and of Taipei in the ROC. In chapter 6 I briefly mention a few films addressing urban development in places such as Guangzhou, Chongqing, Tianjin, and Xi'an, yet closer analysis of cinema and policy in these cities, which awaits another occasion, is likely to yield different views, precisely due to their peripheral status.

In mapping Chinese responses to urbanization, this book skirts Hong Kong cinema, for a while the most prolific film industry in East Asia. Hong Kong films have been persistently concerned with urban growth, from the didactic *In the Face of Demolition* (1953), through the comedy *House of Seventy-Two Tenants* (1973), to the experimental *Chungking Express* (1994). The reasons for excluding Hong Kong are both practical and methodological. Scholars such as Ackbar Abbas, Leung Ping-kwan, and Helen Hok-Sze Leung have skillfully explored questions of urbanism in Hong Kong films.[46] Moreover, urban policy in Hong Kong follows a different logic from that of other Chinese cities, responding to British colonialism, migration from the mainland and Southeast Asia, and the tension between local initiatives and directives from Beijing. A prominent example is found in the site of Kowloon City (Gao Lung Sing), the evacuation and demolition of which has been portrayed critically on screen, notably in *Cageman* (1992), *Hollywood, Hong Kong* (2001), and *Re-cycle* (2006). The gentrification of Kowloon City, one of the first joint endeavors by the British colonial authorities and the PRC government, may provide an entry point to a future study of the complex dynamics in a city whose urban policy has been as blurry and fragmented as its identity.

My focus on seats of political power and cultural hegemony, at the expense of marginalized locations of a hybrid ethos—from the sweatshops of Shenzhen to the pidgin idioms of Kuala Lumpur—leaves it for future studies to address other meeting points between film and the city. James Tweedie and I have argued for the importance of looking at "the city's edge"—the location where the cinema challenges existing conceptions of urbanism and ultimately encounters its own limitations.[47] My book awaits being complemented by studies of urban cinema with emphases on what lies beyond the cities—the suburbs, intra-Asian links, and global contexts.

Any definition of "the Chinese city" is bound to reveal ideological bias and neglect important aspects of urbanism and film. Insofar as this study weaves a history out of the disparate locations, as if they were islands linked by submerged ridges, it also foregrounds the unique dynamics of each

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place. Rather than what Gilles Deleuze calls "any-space-whatevers" (*espaces quelconques*),[48] which seem universal and suspended outside any power structure, the sites at hand literally reterritorialize ideological abstractions. These concrete spaces bridge through symbolically pregnant chronotopes, between the material city and its imaginary constructions. From the Longxugou project promoted by *Dragon Whisker Creek* to the image overhaul occasioned by the Olympics and spoofed in *Big Shot's Funeral*, films have taken an active part in forging the city.

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