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Ch. 8 Deconstructing Orientalism. DEFA's Fictions of East Asia

Qinna Shen

When the German Democratic Republic (GDR) was founded on 7 October 1949, three states in East Asia had already embraced socialism – Mongolia, North Korea, and China – and all three presented themselves as natural allies for the German newcomer in the Soviet bloc.¹ As early as 25 October 1949, the GDR established diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC); and within less than six months this network was extended to include the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (7 November 1949) and the Mongolian People's Republic (13 April 1950).² Official recognition by the governments of these East Asian countries was all the more important because the Federal Republic (FRG) committed huge resources to a diplomatic blockade against the GDR and in December 1955 declared that any formal relationship between a non-communist country and the GDR would provoke punitive measures. The Federal Republic's policy of non-recognition – the so-called 'Hallstein Doctrine' – effectively deterred countries in the non-aligned world from making contact with the GDR at an official level.³ Nevertheless, the East German government continually attempted to subvert this diplomatic blockade by soliciting recognition as an equal and sovereign nation wherever it could.

This essay considers the ways in which East Asian states were represented by DEFA's filmmakers, and the extent to which the aesthetics of these films – for the most part rooted in a concept of socialist realism – challenged quasi-orientalist notions of the culture and society of those states. Such notions included the suggestion that East Asian regimes were 'inherently inferior' to their Western counterparts and consisted of subservient peoples ruled over by cruel and villainous

tyrants. To further justify the colonialist enterprise, East Asia was also seen as a huge threat to the security and well-being of Europe. The origins of the racist term ‘Yellow Peril’ (Gelbe Gefahr), a term used by Kaiser Wilhelm II in 1895,⁴ extend well beyond late nineteenth-century Germany and are rooted in the fear of Genghis Khan and Mongol invasions of Europe. In popular culture, the stereotype of the ‘Yellow Peril’ was reinforced via the Fu Manchu novels/films in both Europe and the USA and deployed to legitimize colonial rule and domestic xenophobic exclusion.⁵ During World War II, the Soviet Army was similarly depicted in terms of Asiatic hordes who, like Genghis Khan, were supposedly capable of all kinds of monstrous cruelty. Such stereotypes also informed the rhetoric of the Cold War, as exemplified by Robert Rigg’s anti-communist treatise *Red China’s Fighting Hordes*, which was published in 1951 at the height of the Korean War to support the American war effort. Rigg, a US lieutenant colonel, analyzes the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) – which he portrays as made up of backward, barbaric ochre hordes – its leaders, and its organizational strengths and weaknesses.⁶ By contrast, the DEFA films to be discussed here adopt a very different stance. They resonate with arguments against the ideology of the ‘Yellow Peril’, suggesting instead that – as the colonial history of the region shows – it was not the ‘Yellow Peril’ but rather the ‘White Peril’ that presented the real threat to world peace.⁷

Like the Middle Eastern and North African countries singled out for analysis in Edward Said’s classic study *Orientalism* (1978), East Asia also experienced a long history of imperialist interventions; these included a period of semi-colonial rule in China following the First Opium War between Great Britain and China (1839-1842), the establishment of colonial rule in French Indochina, American military support for Chiang Kai-shek, and the direct involvement of US combat troops in the Korean War.

Although the depiction of technologically backward societies in films such as *Vom Amnok-kang zum Kymgansan* [*From Amnok River to Mt. Kumgang*, dir. Walter Marten, 1957] and *Die goldene Jurte* [*The Golden Yurt*, dir. Gottfried Kolditz and Rabschaa Dordschpalam, 1961] would, at first sight, appear to echo such orientalist prejudices such as the supposed ‘inferiority’ of East Asian cultures, actually the reverse is true. The films argue instead that the reason why development in Third World states lags behind that of first-world nations is a reflection of social, historical and economic forces. Put another way, if such nations are ‘inferior’ then that inferiority is not natural, but a direct consequence of earlier exploitation by capitalist/imperialist nations. Accordingly, the films make the case for a new type of relationship, namely one rooted in the concept of a global socialist partnership (as opposed to a dichotomy of the colony and the ‘motherland’). These films suggest that orientals and occidentals are equals and there is no reason why – given the right kind of economic aid and national development – these East Asian states could not match their counterparts in the West.

By and large, the socialist-realist style of DEFA’s documentary films about East Asia is used to construct an unambiguously positive image of the fledgling socialist states, and one which runs directly counter to stereotypical notions of the Far East as either barbaric and cruel or backward, exotic and sensual. For example, the tinker who walks the alleys of Beijing to mend cracked cast-iron pots in *China – Land zwischen gestern und morgen* [*China – A Country between Yesterday and Tomorrow*, dir. Joop Huisken and Robert Menegoz, 1957] may strike non-Chinese viewers as an exotic example of East Asian ‘backwardness’. However, the socialist-realist aesthetic of this documentary ensures that the tinker is portrayed as a transitional figure whose activities link the historical milieu of small-scale manual labour with the modernity of

contemporary large-scale industrial production [see Fig. 1]. Socialist-realist documentaries of this kind not only challenged orientalist clichés, but also presented the struggle against imperialism and the drive to socialist nation-building as goals that East German citizens had in common with their counterparts in East Asia. The pre-war colonialist projects of Britain, France, and the USA are continually subjected to criticism and those same nations are presented as enemies of socialism on account of their post-war political aspirations. Not surprisingly, the USA, because of its post-war occupation of Germany and its role in the Cold War, is almost always singled out for particular criticism.



Fig. 1: Screenshot 21:49. The collision of Old and New in *China – Land Zwischen gestern und Morgen* © DEFA-Stiftung/Robert Ménégöz, Jean Penzer, Joop Huisken.

As early as the 1950s (and thus well before the anti-colonial struggles and national liberation movements that would unfold in Latin America, Africa, and Asia during the 1960s), developments in East Asia provided East German filmmakers with a new non-European context in which (often familiar) messages designed to mobilize GDR citizens for national and international causes could be re-cycled. Films such as *Starke Freunde im fernen Osten* [*Strong Friends in the Far East*, dir. Bruno Kleberg, 1956], *Von Wismar nach Shanghai* [*From Wismar to Shanghai*, dir. Rudolf Schemmel, 1958], as well as the fairy-tale film *Die goldene Jurte* with its Mongolian setting, present an explicitly Marxist analysis of the legacy of colonialism and its capitalist underpinning. Although not all the films are entirely free from conventional orientalist tropes, they do nonetheless conceptualise the East-West binary in a radically new way. By underlining the solidarity between the GDR and East Asia, the films re-position the GDR as 'other' to the imperialist nations of the West (including not only Britain, France, and America but also, and perhaps most importantly, the Federal Republic). At the same time, in a number of instances, the films' analysis of the political, economic, and social structures of East Asian socialist states functions as a mirror in which contemporary political issues in the GDR and the Soviet bloc generally are mediated. Of course, it might be argued that, in exploiting the potential of such documentaries as a means of engaging with problems closer to home, East German filmmakers laid themselves open to the charge of instrumentalising the East Asian 'Other', thereby underlining the old adage that the Self can never be entirely extricated from the discourse of the Other.

When these transnational productions are considered chronologically against the background of developments in diplomatic relations between states in the Soviet bloc, it can be seen that, geographically speaking, the films move from North Korea

to China in the 1950s, then from China to Mongolia in 1961 (at the start of the Sino-Soviet Split) before returning to China in the 1980s after tensions between the two nations subsided. However, each East Asian country configures a different set of problems and mobilizes a different ideological register. North Korea is the only one involved in a ‘hot war’ played out in the Third World, all of which made it a convenient ideological bridge to the situation in Vietnam later.⁸ DEFA documentaries about Korea trace the causes of this ‘hot war’ to fascism and imperialism as twin manifestations of late capitalism. By contrast, the films about China that straddle the Sino-Soviet Split place greater emphasis on revolutionary history, internationalism, solidarity, productivism, and the emancipation of women – all issues central to programmes of socialist nation-building during this period. For its part, Mongolia might be seen as an ‘ersatz China’ after the Sino-Soviet Split had rendered the production of films about the PRC problematic; and for that reason the films’ praise of Mongolia’s modernization during the 1960s (when the films were released) is not always wholly convincing.

North Korea

DEFA films about North Korea such as *Die amerikanischen Schandtaten in Korea – ein Tatsachenbericht* [*American Crimes in Korea – A Factual Report*, dir. Feodor Pappé, 1951]⁹ and *Vom Amnok-kang zum Kymgansan* concentrate predominantly on the 1950s and on the Korean War (1950-53) in particular – the first armed conflict that mobilized ideological rivals on both sides of the Cold War divide. In these films, the entry of (US controlled) United Nations troops into the war to help the South Koreans is presented as a justification for the GDR’s anti-American and anti-imperialist propaganda of the 1950s. DEFA’s tendentious portrayal of the destruction

of North Korea was designed to evoke sympathy from East German citizens for both Asian victims and (implicitly) for all victims of Western aggression (including East Germans). In passing we might note that the films refer to the military aid Chiang Kai-shek received from the Americans and to the Chinese leader's visit to South Korea in 1949. In this way, DEFA's filmmakers highlighted China's vital role in assisting North Korea, while at the same time criticising America's intervention in East Asian affairs. East German viewers would inevitably associate such military interference with the American occupation of Germany immediately after World War II and alliance with the Federal Republic soon afterwards. Seen from this perspective, films about divided Korea mirrored not only the division of Germany, but also the GDR's own efforts at post-war reconstruction

Using considerable quantities of footage captured from the enemy (so-called 'Beutefilme'), the short film *Die amerikanischen Schandtaten in Korea* focuses on 'war crimes' committed by Americans and South Koreans during the Korean conflict. The film begins with a definitive statement of authenticity: 'This film places a documentary record of indisputable facts before the world. Parts of it were made by the US information service and were captured at Seoul after its liberation on June 28, 1950, by the Korean People's Army' (English in original). Visceral images of mutilated corpses are shown while the voice-over explains that 'thousands of political prisoners were murdered when the South Korean troops retreated'.¹⁰ Sequences showing North Korean cities such as Namp'o, Won San, Heung Nam, and An Joo in ruins after American bombardments highlight the civilian casualties and destruction of non-military targets. As the camera captures images of these ruins, the voice-over points out that the Americans' assertion that 'only military targets were hit' was not true. The film does not, however, refer to the fact that the conflict was triggered by

North Korea's invasion of the South on 25 June 1950, an acknowledgement that would, of course, have undermined its explicit solidarity with North Korea. Instead, the narrative and images accuse the American government of interfering in the internal affairs of a foreign state and waging an aggressive, imperialist war on North Korea. The film shows the arrival of the American fleet in South Korea in 1948 and the sending of some 500 American advisors to the country. It also includes a clip of Chiang Kai-shek's 1949 visit to China, South Korea, to take part in a meeting with the South Korean president, Syngman Rhee.¹¹ In this way it sets up a contrast between, on the one hand, China's crucial intervention on behalf of North Korea and, on the other, America's former support of Chiang's nationalist forces in their struggle against the communists and its current support of South Korea in its struggle against the North. In *Die amerikanischen Schandtaten in Korea*, Feodor Pappé's emphasis is primarily on American (rather than South Korean) participation in the war; as a result the film's analysis of the Korean War also serves to justify the GDR's anti-Americanist stance in the wider context.

Also released during the first year of the Korean War, a bulletin from 1950 in the DEFA newsreel *Der Augenzeuge* [*The Eyewitness*, 1950/28] argues the case for a continuity between fascism and imperialism before suggesting that it was the latter that prompted the US to engage in Korea. The newsreel shows street demonstrations by German workers alongside members of the Free German Youth (FDJ) and the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) in Hamburg, protesting against 'the criminal attack of the USA on the People's Republic of Korea'. In an attempt to solicit solidarity with North Korea from all quarters, the East German voice-over appeals to the sympathies of even West German viewers, pointing out that the Federal Republic too has a stake in this conflict as it might be the next victim of American aggression

should the US decide to take care of ‘unfinished business’ from World War II. ‘US strategists’, he argues, ‘would not hesitate to attack that which they had been unable to destroy during World War II thanks to the advance of the Soviet army’. Ostensibly a report about protestors demonstrating against the war in Korea, the bulletin shifts its focus on to the Allied bombing raids and the war-time suffering of Germans. This is just one example of how *Der Augenzeuge* exploited any opportunity to draw a parallel between American bombing raids in North Korea and the Allied bombing of Germany during World War II. Positing such an analogy was also typical of the Socialist Unity Party’s (SED) political rhetoric about the Korean War.¹² The following bulletins in this newsreel go on to censure both America’s alliance with Chiang Kai-shek and the arming of German legionnaires in the French colonial war in Indochina, thus making a sweeping condemnation of the West’s collusion in the recent colonial history.

Four years after the Korean War ended, DEFA sent its own filmmakers to visit the war-torn country. Shot in Agfacolor, the documentary *Vom Amnok-kang zum Kymgansan* uses the river border in the north and the scenic Diamond Mountain in the south as territorial markers to symbolize North Korea’s sovereignty. The film bears witness to the accomplishments of the GDR’s socialist ally in post-war reconstruction, including the building of a hydroelectric power plant, a shipyard, and a steel mill destroyed by American bombs. Sequences showing ordinary peasants growing food and going about their daily lives attest to the filmmakers’ efforts to convey a sense of everyday life in North Korea. However, as the narrator points out, while the implements they use may still be primitive, the land now belongs to the peasants. The sparse images and short duration of the film (just 19 minutes in total) suggests that there was little reconstruction in North Korea that could be filmed and singled out for

special praise. Nonetheless, as the voice-over solemnly states – ‘there is peace in North Korea’ – normal everyday life had been restored. East German specialists helping North Korea’s reconstruction are captured on camera in a manner that seems designed to remind East German viewers of the strength of the GDR’s economy in 1957 – especially when compared to other socialist states in East Asia. Like the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia, the GDR too, acting in a spirit of internationalist solidarity, sent experts to socialist countries in the Third World, and the images in the film serve to underline its status as an advanced European nation making its distinctive mark on the world stage.

The sequences of peaceful international cooperation are, however, disrupted by images of bomb craters and other painful reminders of the war. In addition to the craters, we are shown a cemetery where Korean soldiers are buried: ‘10,000 soldiers were buried here; they all could have lived if foreign tanks, cannons, and airplanes had not attacked the country’. It is striking that the narrator does not say whether the soldiers are from the North or the South. Yet it would appear that the graves contain the bodies of soldiers from both sides, thus realizing the ‘unity’ of Korea in an especially macabre way; it is the ‘foreign tanks, cannons, and airplanes’ that have caused their death. For East Germans watching the film, the allusion to ‘foreign’ war machines would, no doubt, invoke memories of the Allied bombing of Germany and the subsequent division of Germany into occupation zones. *Vom Amnok-kang zum Kymgansan* ends at the Military Demarcation Line between the two Korean states. The war machines may be on display in museums, but American troops continue to patrol in the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). As the narrator points out ‘foreign troops are still stationed here’ because, according to the armistice agreement, Americans are South Koreans’ partners in negotiation, a statement implying that the

Korean conflict was an internal matter that did not warrant US intervention. (Likewise, in the eyes of East Germans, Americans could be regarded as ‘negotiation partners’ stationed on the foreign territory of the Federal Republic). The film draws a parallel between the national divisions of the two Korean and German states to condemn America’s role in both. However, while *Vom Amnok-kang zum Kymgansan* highlights South Korea’s lack of sovereignty, it is diplomatically silent about the extent of foreign control in North Korea. Although shot in 1957 – some four years before the construction of the Berlin Wall – it is hard to imagine that the film and its analysis of the situation in Korea did not prompt East German viewers to reflect on the continuing presence of Allied forces in their own divided nation.

China

There are more DEFA documentaries about China than about all the other East Asian countries put together, a statistic that had much to do with China’s ideological and political status at the time.¹³ Between 1956 and 1961, DEFA produced six documentaries about China: *Starke Freunde im fernen Osten* (1956), *China – Land zwischen gestern und morgen* (1956/1957), *Von Wismar nach Shanghai* (1958), as well as three films by Gerhard Jentsch – *Wir berichten aus Pan Yü* [*We Report from Pan Yü*, 1959], *Wir sangen und tanzten in China* [*We Sang and Danced in China*, 1959], and *Genosse Sziau erzählt* [*Comrade Xiao Narrates*, 1960/61]. In addition, Joris Ivens’s *Lied der Ströme* [*Songs of the Rivers*, 1954] and his film *Die Windrose* [*The Compass Rose*, 1956] have significant references to the Chinese revolution and post-revolution construction as part of the international socialist struggle.¹⁴

Most of these films begin by depicting the semi-colonial era of China in order to convey a sense of the liberation and freedom from oppression that the PRC has

provided for its population. For example, when historic sites such as the Forbidden City and the Temple of Heaven in Beijing are shown in *Starke Freunde im fernen Osten*, the voice-over points out that these imperial places were inaccessible to ordinary Chinese until the founding of the PRC; in *Wir sangen und tanzten in China*, viewers are also told that buildings visible from the Forbidden City were not allowed to be higher than the palace itself; but all this has now changed. A deep-seated admiration for the long, hard-fought – but ultimately successful – communist revolution in China runs through all of the films about the PRC. The price that Chinese communists paid for their revolution instils an affective quality in the voice-over: ‘Our path is covered with blood’! and ‘The victims of the revolution will never die’! we are told in *Starke Freunde im fernen Osten*. It would not have taken long for East German filmmakers and viewers alike to draw parallels between the sufferings of the Chinese communists and those the German communists endured under the Nazis, as well as the similarities between the cults of Mao and Stalin. Likewise, praise of revolutionary achievements in the ‘new China’ can be read, during the early 1950s at least, as coded praise of Stalinism in the ‘new Germany’ that was the GDR. In this way, these international documentaries could also be integrated into the GDR’s own anti-fascist foundational narratives.

The narration in these films strikes an unmistakably anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist tone. Shanghai’s colonial past is invariably invoked when the famous promenade, the Bund with its Western architecture, is shown. For example, the narrator in *China – Land zwischen gestern und morgen* states: ‘Shanghai, a 7-million-strong city, with skyscrapers and gigantic hotels, with parks and avenues; once a symbol of foreign rule, with foreign concessions, child labour, and a flourishing opium trade. After liberation, this major port is China’s gateway to the world’. As *Wir*

berichten aus Pan Yü shows, visits to military bases (often part of the official agenda for guests from the GDR) remind the viewer of the need for China to remain vigilant: 'Never forget', the voice-over warns, 'that socialist China is a thorn in the eyes of imperialists'! The travel reportage *Von Wismar nach Shanghai* about the maiden voyage of a 10,000-ton freighter named 'Friendship' to Shanghai does not focus on international trade or tourism. Instead, the narrator exploits the travelogue format to lament the continuing colonial status of Algeria and Yemen: 'Over there lies the coast of Algeria. A French gunship; how much longer will it be stationed there? The most beautiful island of Malta; how much longer will the island be the bomber base for the US fleet and NATO's marine headquarters?'. When passing Indonesia, the voice-over hails Indonesia's recent independence from 'Dutch imperialism'. Clearly, DEFA took every opportunity to comment on the colonial policies of Western Europe, and the former colonies in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia provided many opportunities for it to re-emphasise the ideological divide between the GDR and the FRG. Sailing into the port of Shanghai, the narrator exclaims that, for the first time, the crew of a ship sailing under the GDR flag has set eyes on the 'China that is now our friend'. Hardworking Chinese dockers load 'gifts of friendship' such as silk, spices, tobacco, nuts, tea, and valuable ores onto the ship.

While the Federal Republic used both carrots and sticks to prevent other developing nations from forming relationships with the GDR, for its part the SED attempted to discredit its Western neighbour by implicating it in the history of colonialism, fascism, and imperialism. In this way the GDR was able to assume the moral high ground and, at the same time, bolster its own antifascist narratives.¹⁵ The SED promoted the GDR's image as the 'revolutionary' Germany, so as to avoid being seen as the 'poor' Germany 'that could not match its rival's much larger aid

programs'.¹⁶ As *Starke Freunde im fernen Osten* documents, during his state visit to China in December 1955 Otto Grotewohl, the GDR's first Prime Minister, handed back to China that which, as he put it, had been 'looted by German imperialists': a number of volumes of the *Yongle Encyclopaedia* compiled during the Ming Dynasty as well as flags taken during the Boxer Rebellion. The seizing of the encyclopaedia and flags was, of course, trivial compared to the wholesale exploitation of the country undertaken by the Western powers since the end of the First Opium Wars in 1842. However, China's first Premier, Zhou Enlai, regarded this as the start of a process of retrieving treasures lost during China's semi-colonial period: 'It won't be too long before all the spoils looted by imperialists will be returned to China'. The narrator construes the return of the Boxer flags as a diplomatic event inspired by genuinely progressive political convictions: 'As German socialists, descendants of Marx and Engels, we hand the flags back to you'. Grotewohl's symbolic gesture reflected the GDR's sympathetic view of the Boxer Rebellion as a peasant revolution against feudal and imperialist oppression.¹⁷ On the one hand, it demonstrated the GDR's dissociation from German imperialism because of the role Wilhelminian Germany played in quashing the Boxer Rebellion. On the other hand, the return of the Boxer flags also suggested that it is the GDR – not the Federal Republic – that was the legitimate successor to pre-war Germany; and that only it had the right (and responsibility) to correct the mistakes of the past.

These 1950s films routinely represent China as a nation in transition. The best example of this is the DEFA-French co-production *China – Land zwischen gestern und morgen* – a film that was supported by China's Ministry for Culture and Filmmaking. Shot in Agfacolor, the film was praised as a masterpiece of the documentary genre in numerous newspaper reviews.¹⁸ The two directors, Joop

Huisken and Robert Menegoz, also won a state film and television award – the Heinrich Greif Prize – in 1957.¹⁹ Huisken and Menegoz's film captures the huge economic and social upheavals that the 600 million Chinese have undergone since the founding of the new socialist republic. Old and new stand in constant contrast: massive dams are built not far from the Great Wall; a column of trucks drive alongside loaded camels; an itinerant tinker carrying his traditional tools passes through a modern steel plant; a couple in the countryside celebrate their wedding in accordance with traditional custom, but their marriage is no longer arranged; peasants continue to grow and harvest rice, but now they can own land and exchange rice for money; and while boats have to be hauled upstream using a system of men and ropes, a railway network is being built with the help of a female engineer. Accompanied by non-diegetic Chinese music and a cinematography that, at times, seems inspired by Chinese watercolours, the narrator (Wolfgang Kieling with a script by Bodo Uhse) often resorts to a metaphorical language that brings out the contrasts between old and new in a manner that is by turns both lyrical and sentimental: 'The plough sows new seeds in the old soil'; 'A new life pulses through the old gates of Beijing'; and 'The old city of Beijing has a young heart.' The film depicts China's endeavours in the drive to socio-economic development and modernisation and emphasises the diligence and work ethic of the Chinese people who carry the nation's hopes for the future.

By contrast, all three of Gerhard Jentsch's documentaries – *Wir berichten aus Pan Yü*, *Wir sangen und tanzten in China*, and *Genosse Sziau erzählt* – bear witness to the unprecedented and (in hindsight) catastrophic developments in China during the 1950s: the Great Leap Forward (1958 to 1961) and the People's Commune. The films enthusiastically support the People's Commune as an example of the concerted and

efficient utilization of collective power that is not unlike the Agricultural Production Cooperatives (LPGs) established in the GDR. The fact that Walter Ulbricht led a delegate to the CCP's 8th Party Congress in October 1956 to learn about Chinese approaches to agricultural collectivization suggests that, in addition to following the Soviet model, the GDR of the 1950s was also eager to learn from China.²⁰

Wir berichten aus Pan Yü visits the district of Pan Yü in the city of Canton with the aim of familiarizing East German viewers with the collectivist operations and achievements of the People's Commune there. Against a background of Chinese propaganda songs praising the Party, the German voice-over relays the Chinese government's official rhetoric emphasising its ambition to match – and surpass – the achievements of Western countries. The film includes sequences showing the production of steel from scrap metal in backyard furnaces (in the manner that Mao – with subsequently disastrous consequences – had advocated). The brevity of these sequences depicting such backward technology hints at a lack of faith in, or perhaps even disapproval of, such primitive methods on the part of the German filmmakers. Be that as it may, it is striking that the film fails to offer an explicit critique of the political, economic, and cultural campaigns waged in Red China; and the lack of any genuine criticism in this and other DEFA documentaries about China merely serves as a reminder of the constraints under which its teams had to operate when working in other socialist countries.

Friendship between China and the GDR is a central feature in almost all these documentaries. As Weijia Li notes, the roots of this friendship can be traced back to the Weimar Republic, when Chinese communists and other leftist activists living and studying in Germany collaborated with their German counterparts before the Nazis came to power.²¹ Such transnational friendships were the very opposite of the kind of

anti-oriental prejudice embodied in Kaiser Wilhelm II's rhetorical references to Chinese as the 'Yellow Peril'. A similar evocation of such international friendship is reflected in the film *Wir sangen und tanzten in China*, a film that covers a tour to China in late 1958 by the GDR's Erich-Weinert Ensemble [see Fig. 2]. As we watch the ensemble visiting a warship in southern China in the wake of the Second Taiwan Strait Crisis in August 1958, the narrator cautions against the threat from (non-communist) Taiwan that, as he puts it, could 'disrupt our celebrations of friendship'. Here too, what starts off as a report about a cultural exchange between Germans and Chinese soon becomes a series of reflections about the vicissitudes of the Cold War.



Fig. 2: Screenshot 37:08. The ensemble sang songs that echoed the Chinese government's rhetoric about overtaking England and America in *Wir sangen und tanzten in China* © DEFA-Stiftung/Peter Barthel, Peter Sbrzesny.

This friendship between the GDR and China, however, proved to be a fragile arrangement and one that depended on good relations between the Soviet Union and China. Due to irreconcilable differences on ideological and socio-economic issues, such as the People's Commune, the process of de-Stalinization, and Khrushchev's policy of peaceful coexistence with the US, the Sino-Soviet relations deteriorated around 1960 leading to a recall of all Soviet experts stationed in China and the interruption of a great number of collaborative projects. As a Soviet satellite state, the GDR had little choice but to follow Moscow's lead.²² Tensions between China and the GDR built up in 1960 as the SED's policy shifted in accordance with Moscow's condemnation of the People's Commune. The public break with China came during the SED's 6th Party Congress in January 1963.²³ DEFA documentaries such as *Wir berichten aus Pan Yü* and *Wir sangen und tanzten in China* that had depicted the Great Leap Forward and the People's Commune in a positive light came to be regarded as historically erroneous. By the same token, the celebrations of the Sino-German friendship in such films as *Starke Freunde im fernen Osten* had been overtaken by events on the political stage and appeared equally out of place.

The Sino-Soviet Split that lasted for two decades curtailed DEFA's interaction with China, since the making of transnational documentaries was heavily contingent upon political relations between the two nations. However, when the tension between the Soviet Union and China eased during the early 1980s, the GDR immediately resumed economic and cultural exchanges with China. During the GDR's final years, DEFA made a number of China-related films – for the most part ethnographic travel reportages commissioned by East German state television. The best known is the eight-part series – *Stromabwärts nach Shanghai* [*Downstream to Shanghai*, dir. Uwe

Belz, 1987]. These films visualize a rapidly developing China and provide a much broader and more detailed coverage of Chinese landscapes, people, culture and traditions (including martial arts, acrobatics, and local operas). The film team flew into Beijing, which is the focus of the first instalment in the series. This episode notes that, among other achievements, China has built more apartment blocks in Beijing since 1981 than in the thirty years before that, and that the government is planning to continue its programme of housing development so that by 2000 every family would have its own flat.²⁴ The informative report on the housing situation in Beijing was prompted by a similar policy on the part of the SED designed to solve housing shortages in the GDR. These and other cultural connections between China and the GDR were always highlighted whenever a suitable opportunity presented itself, such as the student exchange programme for those studying at Peking University and the Humboldt University in East Berlin.

Although the overtly Marxist-Leninist rhetoric of this 1987 television series is toned down, the ideological paradigm remains similiar to that in earlier documentaries dating back to the 1950s. Each episode explores one city along the Yangtze River except for the one on Beijing. The episode on Chongqing, at that time a major city in the province of Sichuan, has much in common with reports from the 1950s in terms of its ideological positioning. After the Qing Dynasty was defeated in the first Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895), Chongqing and a number of other Chinese cities were forced to become treaty ports for capitalist powers: 'Chongqing, 1895. After the First Sino-Japanese War, the city had to be opened to capitalist powers for their business branches and semi-colonial exploitations'. The city still exhibits indelible traces of the Communist revolution: 'There were twenty such prisons in Chongqing at that time. Two of them have been kept as memorials. Here revolutionaries were tortured and

murdered barbarically. Mao's handwriting commemorates those who no longer live to see the victory of the revolution'. The creation of the PRC liberated a city of coolies from misery: 'The Monument of Liberation in sight at the market place calls to mind of a time, when Chongqing was a city of coolies and misery. Since the establishment of the People's Republic many new things have been built and, since the beginning of modernisation, faster and more generously than ever before'. A massive quarry, with the noise of hammers and chisels, is compared to a concert that the manual labourers play: 'It seems as if we have walked into a concert with hammers and chisels in huge fields. Heavy rocks are still carried manually. There are still no machines. But the work is important for the country'.

The anti-imperialist rhetoric abated in the 1980s – a change that was essential given the new developments in international geopolitics. The belligerent discourse of the 1950s now sounded out-dated, detrimental, and politically incorrect. Chinese officials openly encouraged this change of tone following Deng Xiaoping's new economic and foreign policy and his willingness to embrace Western capitalism. During Erich Honecker's visit to China in 1986 – a visit that took place after the two countries had re-established diplomatic relations – the then General Secretary Hu Yaobang promised that China would never damage the close relationships that existed between socialist countries in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Hu also recommended abandoning the use of certain terminologies, such as 'US imperialism, Japanese militarism, or West German revanchism'.²⁵

As in the 1950s, DEFA films of the 1980s such as *Stromabwärts nach Shanghai, Zwischen Großer Mauer und Perlfloss – Begegnungen in der Volksrepublik China* [*Between the Great Wall and the Pearl River – Encounters with the People's Republic of China*, first aired on 20 October 1986], *Ni hao – heißt Guten Tag* [*Ni Hao*

– *Means Hello*, dir. Uwe Belz, 1989] did not engage critically with China's policies and, despite over 30 years of strained relations, the Chinese government's rhetoric was adopted as the dominant GDR narrative about China. The fact that the Chinese government often co-sponsored East German film projects goes some way to explaining the filmmakers' need to adopt the discourse of the Chinese government. These films repeatedly affirm improved living standards and go out of their way to show an abundance of consumer goods in China. At a time when Eastern Europe was facing a period of economic stagnation on account of out-dated technology and collapsing industries, DEFA filmmakers seem to have appealed to China's economic success in an attempt to reassure GDR citizens that socialism was still capable of creating high standards of living. However, whereas China created a hybrid communist/capitalist model to achieve political stability as well as economic growth, this was impossible for the GDR due to its dependence on the Soviet Union.

Mongolia

After DEFA had discontinued its film projects in China in 1961 following the Sino-Soviet Split, it turned its attention to Mongolia and, that same year, joined forces with Mongolkino in Ulan Bator and released two feature-length co-productions: a fairy-tale film titled *Die goldene Jurte* and an ethnographic documentary *Mongolia* (dir. B. Daschdortsch). The reason for releasing both films in 1961 was that this year marked the 40th anniversary of socialist Mongolia. On 9 November 1921, with the backing of the Soviet Union, Outer Mongolia gained *de facto* independence from the Republic of China. After the Sino-Soviet Split began, Mongolia continued to align itself closely with its Soviet sponsor. Given that the films were made in 1961, the quality of the

colour films was something that the Mongolkino alone would not have been able to achieve technically.

Shot primarily in Mongolia, *Die goldene Jurte* adapts a traditional Mongolian tale that emphasises the importance of kindness, diligence, honesty, and filial piety. In the film, the Wise Herdsman (der Weise Arat) gives the shepherd Pagwa a magic chest on the condition that no one open it. In fact the chest contains nothing but air and serves as a magical duct that channels water from the sea to a nearby pond. As long as the chest is full of water, the Valley of Red Blossom will be protected from drought. Pagwa initially believes that the chest contains gold, and the Wise Herdsman reprimands him for making a dangerous secret out of it. Pagwa's two older sons, both of them greedy and lazy, try to steal the key to the chest. Pagwa suffers from depression as a result because a catastrophic drought is looming. The youngest son, Dawadorshi, goes to seek advice from the Wise Herdsman who offers him solutions to three problems: first, Pagwa's melancholy, the dried-out condition of the river, and the blindness of a Mongolian girl (whom he subsequently marries). After Dawadorshi rescues the daughter of the Water-Khan (der Wasserkahn) he receives three gifts – a magical hat, a sheepskin that can summon up rain, and a small hammer that conjures up a golden yurt. His two brothers also redeem themselves (somewhat unconvincingly) by plugging a hole in the water reservoir. The entire family lives happily ever after under the tender care of the daughter-in-law in their golden yurt.

Die goldene Jurte contains a number of extended sequences that are simply designed to showcase the Mongolian landscape (including the steppe and Gobi desert) and local customs (including traditional games and dances, and markets with people buying and selling carpets and furs). These sequences were included primarily to satisfy the curiosity of East German viewers who had virtually no possibility of

travelling there in person. What is particularly striking about the film is the way in which it casts German actors in the role of the Water-Khan and his daughter; all other roles are played by Mongolian actors. Because of their otherworldly origins, the roles of the Water-Khan and his daughter would appear to be the most suited for ‘foreign’ (i.e. non-Mongolian) actors. Nonetheless it is hard to ignore the possibility that casting an East German actor (Kurt Mühlhardt) in the *deus-ex-machina* role of the Water-Khan was a means of highlighting the contribution of the GDR and its citizens in the modernisation of Mongolia and other (socialist) countries in the Third World. For ultimately it is the Water-Khan’s magical gifts that bring happiness to the region. That is to say, by shifting the focus away from the (Mongolian) Wise Herdsman to the (German) Water-Khan, the film adaptation of the original Mongolian tale highlights the crucial role that (East) German assistance plays in building a better and more prosperous Mongolia as symbolized by the golden yurt [see Fig. 3].



Fig. 3. Screenshot 1:03:47. Dawadorshi passes the Water-Khan's test and receives three magic gifts in *Die goldene Jurte* © DEFA-Stiftung/ Peter Blümel.

By contrast, the more prosaic documentary *Mongolia* (also released in 1961) provides a sober reality check on the fairy-tale commentary on Mongolian life and argues that a yurt – even a golden one – is no longer a desirable home in socialist Mongolia. A yurt, according to their government, represents a backward, pastoral, and nomadic existence that Mongolians today should no longer embrace: ‘The People’s Republic has declared the end of the yurt’. The government has ambitious plans for building ‘proper’ houses in order to ensure that the population has a stable, modern existence: ‘Another generation will pass, and then yurts will be nothing more than holiday homes for herdsmen’. Viewed from the perspective of the documentary *Mongolia*, the fairy-tale solution proposed at the end of *Die goldene Jurte* is old-fashioned and impractical in the context of the state’s modernisation. Nonetheless, there are moments where the documentary’s German narrator seems reluctant to back the Mongolian government’s disapproval of the yurt: he claims that yurts ‘should only be on display in the museum and serve as a warning of the terrors of the past’, and yet he is clearly infatuated with their artistic and architectural beauty and admires them as ‘proof of the industriousness and artistry of the Mongolian people’. Although ostensibly endorsing the official policy of renouncing the yurt, even a film like *Mongolia* – that remains ambivalent in its evaluation of the ethnic traditions and cultural values of the yurt – retains the potential to make East German viewers question what is entailed by progress and what new forms of socialist living they should aspire to. Seen from this perspective, the fairy-tale ending of *Die goldene Jurte*

invokes a nostalgia for a way of life that is both utopian and yet out-dated, and hints at a plea not to abandon long-held national traditions too quickly and too radically.

As might be expected, both of the films dealing with Mongolia eulogize socialism, though this is more obviously the case in the documentary *Mongolia* – which is infused with Cold War rhetoric – than in the multi-faceted fairy tale *Die goldene Jurte*. The narrator in *Mongolia* reminds us that ‘in forty years, the People’s Republic has led a small nation out of the dark Middle Ages into the bright dawn of a new era’. As we observe the Mongolian landscape and customs, the narrator heaps praise on the ‘beautiful Mongolian *Heimat*’, before going on to anticipate a critical response from viewers in the West: ‘But this is all very primitive – that’s what some snobbish NATO-Germans will say’. However, blame for the lack of modern consumer goods in Mongolia and difficulties the state is experiencing is placed firmly at the feet of the reactionary lamas. The narrator then goes on to set up a contrast between the political choices of the Mongolian people and those of (politically reactionary) Germans: whereas the former have embraced Lenin, Khrushchev, and world peace, the latter have elected Hindenburg, Hitler, and – in the year of the film’s release – the CSU chairman, Franz-Josef Strauss. The inference is clear: however backward Mongolia may be in terms of its GDP and material standards of living, all of this is more than compensated for by the strength of its ideological commitment to progressive (socialist) politics – a message that, no doubt, resonated with East German viewers in 1961 as they reflected on the economic and ideological gulf between the GDR and the FRG.

Both films also have an anti-religious and anti-feudal thrust. *Die goldene Jurte* is set in a feudal society where the laws of the lamas forbid farming. The Wise Herdsman breaks that taboo and sows corn seeds in order to relieve the prevailing

famine. When the youngest son Dawadorshi reminds him of the law, the Wise Herdsman answers, 'Yes, but who has issued such an absurd ban? It was the powerful. They want people to starve'. As the documentary underlines, the socialist government in Mongolia carried out anti-religious and anti-feudal campaigns designed to divest the lamas of their former power: 'With cunning, deceit, and violence, the lamas used to exclude the people from having power; now they must do productive work and no longer own serfs. Land and livestock have been seized from the monasteries.' The Wise Herdsman's anti-authoritarian attitude casts him in the role of a proto-typical socialist leader who rebels against the old rule. Ultimately, however, real authority in the fairy tale is conferred not upon the Wise Herdsman but rather to the figure of the Water-Khan, whose intervention renders Dawadorshi's search for water finally successful.

What distinguishes *Die goldene Jurte* from the more dogmatic documentary *Mongolia* is its aesthetic form (which is perhaps best described as a provocative blend of socialist and magic realism). The golden yurt with which the fairy-tale adaptation closes embodies a successful conclusion to the struggle for a better future and the establishment of a utopian socialist realm in which virtuous members of the collective can live together in harmony and prosperity as a big and happy socialist family. At one level, the film presents a vision of a future in which the obstacles to political progress caused by the reactionary lamas have been swept aside; but at another, directors Gottfried Kolditz and Rabschaa Dordschpalam exploit the discursive *naïveté* of the fairy-tale form to address the increasingly urgent problem of the deterioration of relations between the Soviet Union and the PRC since the late 1950s. While for most filmmakers in 1961 the Sino-Soviet Split was, in effect, a taboo subject (and thus one quite beyond the scope of conventional socialist-realist documentaries such

as *Mongolia*), in the closed moral world of *Die goldene Jurte*, underpinned as it is by the naïve logic of the fairy tale, Mongolia functions as an exotic location – far removed from the harsh geo-political reality of Sino-Soviet relations – with a hope that future socialist harmony can be articulated.

Conclusion

Analysing DEFA films on East Asia reveals that, while investigations of East Asian societies allowed a new and sympathetic image of East Asia to emerge on European screens, they also often doubled as a commentary on both the role of the GDR in the Third World and on the development of German-German relations during the Cold War. Now that the GDR and the socialist states in East Asia were united in their ideological opposition to British, French, and American imperialism, East German filmmakers set about rejecting clichéd orientalist images of the Far East and foregrounding instead the revolutionary and anti-colonial accomplishments of the fledgling socialist states in East Asia. By and large, these East German productions served dual functions: they assisted in promoting the ruling SED's foreign policy in respect of East Asia, and at the same time they used East Asia as a way of reflecting on pressing issues relating to the contemporary political situation in the GDR and in the Soviet bloc generally. Reports on the Korean War and on the emergence of new socialist states in East Asia could be cited as evidence of the GDR's commitment to, and active involvement in, an anti-fascist, anti-colonial, and anti-imperialist agenda. Moreover, such reports underlined not only the international dimension of the struggle for socialism, but reminded (East German) viewers of their own nation's contribution to this global undertaking.

Notes

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² Japan was the first nation to become the victim of atomic bombs and thus fulfilled a specific function in the GDR's peace program. The few documentaries about Japan during this time are dominated by concerns for security issues and disarmament. For example: *Bedrohte Menschheit* [*Endangered Mankind*, dir. Fumio Kamei, DEFA-Studio für Synchronisation, 1958]; *Zwei Tage im August: Rekonstruktion eines Verbrechens* [*Two Days in August. Reconstruction of a Crime*, dir. Karl Gass, 1982]; *Tele-Atlas: Japan* [1974]. However, as Japan is a non-socialist state it is beyond the scope of the present discussion.

³ William Glenn Gray, *Germany's Cold War. The Global Campaign to Isolate East Germany, 1949-1969*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003; Thomas Barnett, *Romanian and East German Policies in the Third World. Comparing the Strategies of Ceausescu and Honecker*, Westport, CT: Praeger, 1992.

⁴ The murder of two German Catholic missionaries in 1897 provided Wilhelm II the desired excuse to seize Kiaochow Bay in order to expand economic exploits in China. The subsequent murder in 1900 of the German minister in Beijing, Clemens von Kettler, during the Boxer Rebellion prompted the Kaiser to send 10,000 German troops to China. See David M. Crowe, 'Sino- German Relations, 1871– 1917', in Joanne Miyang Cho and David M. Crowe (eds), *Germany and China. Transnational Encounters since the Eighteenth Century*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014, pp. 71-96.

⁵ Gina Marchetti, 'From Fu Manchu to *M. Butterfly* and *Irma Vep*. Cinematic Incarnations of Chinese Villainy', in Murray Pomerance (ed), *Bad. Infamy, Darkness, Evil, and Slime on Screen*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004.

⁶ Lt. Col. Robert B. Rigg, *Red China's Fighting Hordes*, Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1951.

⁷ See Yu-Chien Kuan and Petra Häring-Kuan, *Die Langnasen. Was die Chinesen über uns Deutsche denken*, Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2009. pp. 78-9.

⁸ The term 'hot war' is borrowed from Mark Atwood Lawrence's 'Hot Wars in Cold War Africa', *Reviews in American History*, 32.1 (2004), 114-121. It is a review of Piero Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions. Havana, Washington, and Africa, 1959-1976*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002.

⁹ The film has an alternative title: *Greuelthaten amerikanischer Aggressoren* [*Atrocities of American Aggressors*].

¹⁰ All translations are by the author unless otherwise indicated.

¹¹ Scott T. Price, 'The U.S. Coast Guard's Role in the Korean Conflict', 26 November 2012. See http://www.uscg.mil/history/articles/Korean_War.asp

¹² Robert G. Moeller, 'The Politics of the Past in the 1950s. Rhetorics of Victimisation in East and West Germany', in Bill Niven (ed), *Germans as Victims. Remembering the Past in Contemporary Germany.*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006, pp. 26-42 (pp. 29, 36, and 37).

¹³ Along the same lines, the diplomatic missions to North Korea and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam after 8 December 1954 operated from Beijing with the same GDR ambassador to China, Johannes König.

¹⁴ See Dennis Hanlon, 'Die Windrose', *DEFA Film Library Newsletter* (Jan 2012).

¹⁵ Gray, *Germany's Cold War*, p. 102.

¹⁶ Barnett, *Romanian and East German Policies*, p. 105.

¹⁷ Joseph W. Esherick, *The Origins of the Boxer Uprising*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1987.

¹⁸ See, for example, 'Filmschaffen in Wahrheit und Gemeinsamkeit', *Sächsisches Tageblatt*, 6 November 1956; W. J. 'Am Jangtse steht ein riese auf', *National Zeitung*, 26.3.1957; 'China – Land zwischen gestern und morgen', *BZ am Abend*, 26 March 1957; 'Die Lotosblüten und der neue Stahl', *Neue Zeit*, Berlin – Ostsektor, 27 March 1957; Hans Bergmann, 'Jahrhunderte verbrüdernd sich', *Neues Deutschland*, 28 March 1957; 'Bilddokumente vom neuen China: Ein Gemeinschaftsfilm der Defa und Procinex, Paris', *Das Volk*, Erfurt, 3 April 1957.

¹⁹ Alexander Abusch, 'Reale Perspektiven unserer sozialistischen Filmproduktion,' *Deutsche Filmkunst*, 7/1957, 193-4.

²⁰ Werner Meißner (ed), *Die DDR und China 1949 bis 1990: Politik – Wirtschaft – Kultur. Eine Quellensammlung*. Bearbeitet von Anja Feege. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1995, pp. 83-91; Harald Möller, *DDR und Dritte Welt. Die Beziehungen der DDR mit Entwicklungsländern, eine neues theoretisches Konzept, dargestellt anhand der Beispiele China und Äthiopien, sowie Irak/Iran*, Berlin: Köster, 2003, pp. 112-4.

²¹ Weijia Li, 'Otherness in Solidarity. Collaboration between Chinese and German Left-Wing Activists in the Weimar Republic', in Qinna Shen and Martin Rosenstock (eds), *Beyond Alterity. German Encounters with Modern East Asia*. New York: Berghahn, 2014, pp. 73-93.

²² Lorenz M. Lüthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split. Cold War in the Communist World*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008.

²³ Meißner, *Die DDR und China 1949 bis 1990*, pp. 14-15.

²⁴ See also Mimosa Künzel, 'Abenteuer in China', *Neue Zeit* 19 January 1988.

²⁵ Meißner, *Die DDR und China 1949 bis 1990*, pp. 56 and 369ff.