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Raising the “Bamboo Curtain”: Chinese Films in Divided Germany

Qinna Shen (Bryn Mawr College)

In 1972, just a few months before the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and the People’s Republic of China (PRC) established a diplomatic relationship, the renowned West German film critic Heinz Kersten wrote, “China is still a blank spot on the cinematographic map. West Germans, even well-informed cineastes, know next to nothing about film production in that country.”¹ Indeed, not until the 1980s would the screening of Chinese films become commonplace in West Germany. In 1988, Zhang Yimou’s debut film, *Rotes Kornfeld* (*Red Sorghum*, 红高粱, 1987), became the first Chinese film to win a Golden Bear at the Berlinale.² The German Democratic Republic (GDR), on the other hand, had already imported Chinese films in the 1950s. However, following the Sino-Soviet Split in 1961, the GDR ceased to do so until the 1980s. This chapter traces the importation of Chinese films to divided Germany over the course of four decades, from the early postwar years to the late Cold War period. Interruptions and resumptions of this trade reflect changing diplomatic relationships between China and the two German states.

This study uses Chinese films as receptacles or manifestations of varying Chinese modernisms, ranging from socialist realist cinema to genre films, to explore Sino-German connections. West German critics referred to Chinese films as pictures from behind the “Bambusvorhang” (Bamboo Curtain), a term that played off of Churchill’s “Iron Curtain” and used the orientalist imagery of the bamboo to signify the sociopolitical and cultural-historical as well as linguistic barriers between China and Western countries.³ Since the “Bamboo Curtain” made its first appearance in West German journalism, and not in the Sinophilic East German

press, the term is easy to dismiss as a stereotyping cliché. Nevertheless, the term crystalizes the at once political, cultural, and racial divide that needed to be overcome in order to establish relations between China and divided Germany. Differences in film selection, distribution, and reception in the two German states also reveal their respective ideologies and cultural practices during the Cold War, and thus the rarely told story of Sino-German film exchange complements available Cold War studies.

GDR Import of Chinese Films

In the postwar era, it was the GDR that first established a film trade with the PRC, for political, ideological, and economic as well as cultural reasons. Before the Sino-Soviet Split started in 1961, DEFA Außenhandel, which handled foreign trade for the GDR's state-sponsored studio DEFA (Deutsche Filmaktiengesellschaft), annually acquired a few films from China and showed them in theaters in East Germany. In total, the GDR imported about forty feature films from China before 1961, as well as numerous short films, documentaries, and culture films (*Kulturfilme*). Importing films from the PRC and vice versa contributed to the international socialist solidarity movement, and the show of mutual support helped East Germany raise the "Bamboo Curtain." This was a welcome development for the PRC, which recognized film as an invaluable tool for constructing the nation's global image and consequently participated in international film festivals. At a time when travel to China was still infrequent, film proved to be an important alternative way for Germans to learn about China's culture, history, traditions, customs, society, and people. As a gesture of friendship, the GDR and the PRC mutually celebrated anniversaries by screening each other's films. In addition, it was cost-effective for

East Germany to import films from China because China paid four or five times as much for a DEFA film as DEFA Außenhandel paid for a Chinese film.

Most Chinese films from the 1950s followed the government's anti-feudal, anti-colonial, anti-KMT (Nationalist Kuomintang), and anti-imperialist mandates. By screening these films, the GDR continued its own political work against fascism and Americanism. For Chinese viewers, fascism was primarily represented by Japan. The main imperialist opponent of the Chinese was the American government, which assisted the KMT during the Chinese Civil War (1945–1949) and later intervened in the Korean War (1950–1953). Film proved to be an effective tool for demonizing the KMT along with its American patrons, and for heroicizing the Communists as martyrs as well as invincible soldiers. Thus, similar to the GDR's founding myth of triumph over fascism, the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) created its own foundational narrative to assert that it was not the US-backed KMT but the CCP and its People's Liberation Army (PLA) that led the Chinese people to victory over the Japanese.

Screening Chinese films in the GDR likewise provided East German critics with opportunities to condemn America's cultural imperialism in China. Hollywood films, for example, had been exported to China since the early twentieth century and constituted the majority of foreign films seen in China. During Chiang Kai-shek's reign, Chinese cinemas were, in the words of a GDR critic, "flooded with Hollywood rubbish" ("von Hollywood einströmende Schundflut").⁴ Between 1919 and 1949, China produced about three hundred films after the First World War, mostly with the aid of American financiers.⁵ After October 1949, however, Mao banned American and other Western films, and Mosfilm took the place of Hollywood. In 1950, for example, China synchronized forty Soviet feature films and thirty-six Soviet culture films.⁶ The Soviet Union and China also coproduced a number of documentaries, including *Das*

siegreiche China (Victory of the Chinese People, 中国人民的胜利, 1950) and *Sonne über China. Bei Freunden zu Besuch* (Liberated China, 解放了的中国, 1950). East German critics naturally emphasized the role the Soviet Union played in rebuilding the film industry in the New China.⁷

The first Chinese feature film shown in the GDR was *Die Töchter Chinas* (Daughters of China, 中华女儿, 1949). This and other Chinese films were a sensation at the Fifth International Film Festival in Karlovy Vary in 1950, where *Die Töchter Chinas* was awarded the Freedom Prize. The film portrays a group of eight women who form a partisan group to combat the atrocities committed by Japanese fascists. It ends with the eight women drowning themselves in a river as the Japanese army advances. After watching the film at the festival, the famed DEFA director Kurt Maetzig wrote,

If, out of a complete misunderstanding of Chinese films, we were prepared to see something strange, exotic, possibly even something primitive, then our hasty judgment was corrected by a huge and astounding work of art. It is a film of great humanity, of a certain inner monumentality, shown in the simplest and noblest form. . . . The audience, and they were primarily filmmakers themselves, rose from their seats and watched parts of the film standing. This was not simply a polite gesture, but a spontaneous expression of deep admiration for the artistic presentation of the story.⁸

Maetzig hoped that the GDR would acquire the film, and indeed in June 1951, which had been declared the Month of German-Chinese Friendship, *Die Töchter Chinas* premiered in the cinemas of East Berlin and other cities and received extensive reviews in GDR newspapers.⁹

The second Chinese feature film shown in the GDR was *Stählerne Kämpfer* (Steel Soldiers, 钢铁战士, 1950). The film is set during the Civil War and centers on three soldiers from the Eighth Route Army who endure barbaric torture from KMT agents but nevertheless demonstrate their unwavering loyalty to the Communist cause. In 1951 the film won the Peace Prize at Karlovy Vary and was shown at the World Festival of Youth and Students in East Berlin; it premiered in GDR cinemas on April 18, 1952. East Germany welcomed *Stählerne Kämpfer* as an inspiring model. According to a reviewer, “Tens of thousands of young people from countries oppressed by American imperialism, especially those from the Western part of our homeland (*Heimat*), will gain new strength and courage from the example of Chinese freedom fighters for their own fight against warmongers.”¹⁰ Films from China and other countries supplemented DEFA’s own cinematographic narratives against American imperialism.

Foreigners in anti-imperial Chinese films were often played by Chinese actors. *Tapfere Herzen* (Arise United toward Tomorrow, 团结起来到明天, 1950), for example, depicts a workers’ union under the leadership of a Communist Party secretary as it reacts against capitalistic exploitation and KMT police brutality. The film begins with a US Army jeep arriving at the US Army Advisory Group in Shanghai. In cahoots with the KMT army, the police, and Shanghai capitalists, a US advisor, played by an English-speaking Chinese actor, points out the serious threat Mao’s Liberation Army poses to the KMT-ruled territories south of the Yangtse River. He urges the KMT to devise a plan to defend Shanghai and strengthen security in the rear. In the end, the Liberation Army arrives, Americans and KMT officials desert Shanghai, and workers help protect factories and machines from saboteurs.

Like the very first post-1949 Chinese film, *Brücke* (*Bridge*, 桥, 1949), the spy film *Teufelskrallen* (Cut the Evil’s Claw, 斩断魔爪, 1954) promotes the idea that the new People’s

Republic values intellectuals, represented in both films by an engineer. *Teufelskrallen* was directed by the famed filmmaker Shen Fu, who was later purged during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). In this film, an American intelligence agency based in Hongkong attempts to sabotage Chinese industrial support for the Korean War. An American agent gets in touch with the local spy ring, which is led by the foreign bishop of the local church. The bishop orders the agent to steal the engineer's new weapon designs and lure him to America. The anti-Western, anti-clerical film mixes a reconstruction film (*Aufbaufilm*) with the espionage genre; it ends with the Chinese security forces busting the imperialist spy ring in China, thus the Chinese title, "Chopping the Devil's Claws." The typecasting of evil imperialist roles provides interesting examples of whiteface acting in these socialist realist films. For example, the bishop is played by a Chinese actor who pretends to speak Chinese with a foreign accent.

Chinese films were often dubbed for screening in East Germany, although sometimes only a running commentary was added. Reviewers often criticized the clumsy German synchronization because of the discrepancy between the restrained performances of the Chinese actors and the pathos expressed by the voice-over artists.¹¹ Admittedly, the films from that era are tendentious and schematic, and they rely on a simplistic dualism of good and evil and develop along predictable lines. Nonetheless, many of them, especially the literary adaptations, present an intriguing story that evokes recent historical events with a documentary quality; they also feature good cinematography and excellent acting. These productions joined the ranks of proletarian and leftist cinematic works in world cinema, and together they shaped the Cold War narrative from the socialist perspective.

Film exchange between the GDR and China abruptly stopped in 1962, a consequence of the Sino-Soviet Split that began one year earlier when Nikita Khrushchev pulled all Soviet

experts out of China. The GDR made a public break with China in January 1963 during the Socialist Unity Party's (SED) 6th Party Congress, which stopped just short of ending the diplomatic relationship between the two nations. No more Chinese films were imported until 1983. Films that had already been imported could no longer be screened, with one exception: a children's fantasy film in traditional costume, *Die Zauberaster* (The Magic Aster, 马兰花, 1960). It is noteworthy that right after the two countries became reconciled in 1984, GDR television chose *Die Zauberaster* as the first Chinese film to broadcast. This also indicates that oftentimes the film licenses granted between socialist countries were of unlimited duration.

The Cultural Revolution in China fell within the period of the Sino-Soviet Split, and the Chinese film industry was almost decimated during those ten years. But after the Gang of Four was disbanded in 1976 and the Cultural Revolution officially ended, China's film industry quickly recovered. The GDR and China normalized their relationship in the mid-1980s, culminating in Erich Honecker's visit to China in 1986. From 1984 to 1990, in a mere six years, GDR cinemas and television showed nearly seventy Chinese feature films. In 1982, for the first time since the Sino-Soviet Split, Chinese representatives were invited by Czechoslovak Filmexport to participate at the international film festival in Karlovy Vary in July.¹² The East German delegation observed that the two Chinese representatives were making efforts to establish contact with representatives from other Soviet bloc countries. Their report noted especially close relations between the Chinese visitors and representatives of the Soviet foreign trade company, Sovex-Exportfilm.¹³ This observation encouraged the East Germans to revive the film trade with China. After consulting the head of the GDR delegation, Horst Pehnert, who was also the deputy minister of culture and the director of HV Film, the East German delegation held a long conversation with the two Chinese representatives. The goal of the meeting was to

exchange information about film production in their respective countries and to discuss the possibility of (re)establishing commercial relationships. The following month, HV Film officially authorized resuming the film trade with China.¹⁴ In 1983, the first official film acquisition team from the GDR visited China from April 29 to May 9.¹⁵ The delegate viewed twenty-four feature films and seven short films, and purchased four feature films. The China Film Export and Import Corporation made it clear that its primary motive for exporting films was not economic; rather, the government-run agency sought to ensure that Chinese films would be seen in other countries in order to forge stronger mutual understandings and solidarity in culture and politics. Thus the Chinese were satisfied when DEFA Außenhandel acquired four films and GDR television purchased four more. In return, China also asked DEFA Außenhandel to compile a list of DEFA films made in the past twenty years, during the embargo on film imports provoked by the Sino-Soviet Split.

In the 1950s, ideological concerns governed film trade, but in the 1980s this was no longer the case, at least not on the surface. The GDR officials who selected films for import emphasized socio-critical content, artistic and narrative quality, technical achievement, and entertainment value in their decisions. A good number of films were rejected because they were dialogue-heavy, or because they assumed a lot of background knowledge about the topic. Some films were thematically geared toward domestic audiences in China and were not of interest to East German audiences. Sometimes they were co-productions with Hongkong, and China did not own the copyright.

The GDR likewise embraced films that dealt critically with the Cultural Revolution and the personal tragedies it caused, among them the Chinese classics *Der Pferdehirt* (The Herdsman, 牧马人, 1981) and *Die Stadt Hibiskus* (Hibiskustown, 芙蓉镇, 1987). *Die Stadt*

Hibiskus portrays a peasant woman (played by Liu Xiaoqing 刘晓庆) who has achieved a measure of prosperity, but a Party secretary, an ambitious and jealous woman, persecutes her as “a capitalist class enemy” during the Cultural Revolution. The film won the Grand Prix at the Karlovy Vary film festival in 1988.

Interestingly, in the 1980s the GDR declared that it would reject anti-Japanese and anti-KMT films. However, the HV directive was followed only superficially. If the GDR wanted any Chinese films at all, it could hardly avoid importing anti-Japanese, anti-KMT, and anti-imperialist films since they were an integral part of the Chinese government’s patriotic education. On the other hand, Chinese films from the 1980s no longer embodied these messages in the stark socialist realism of the 1950s, but were infused with more entertainment value (*Schauwert*) and covered a variety of genres, including *Krimi* (crime films), historical and costume dramas, everyday film (*Alltagsfilm*), and most importantly, kung fu or martial arts films.

Like the GDR, China initially repudiated kung fu films because they were associated with capitalist Hong Kong. However, it succumbed to the economic promise of this lucrative genre and produced “Easterns” of its own by combining kung fu fighting with historical events such as the Taiping Rebellion (1850–1864), the Boxer Rebellion (1900), and the revolts led by Sun Yatsen toward the end of the Qing Dynasty. These films were aligned with the official narratives of the PRC and often established a clear divide between good and evil, which the kung fu genre performatively and formulaically embodies. After *Die Zauberaster*, the second Chinese film to appear on GDR TV was an anti-Japanese and anti-KMT film, *Weißer Lotosblüte* (White Lotus, 白莲花, 1980), which spotlights the protagonist’s kung fu performance. The second Chinese film screened in GDR cinemas, after *Ein Dorf in der Großstadt* (A Corner in the City, 都市里的村庄, 1982), was an action thriller, *Der geheimnisvolle Buddha* (Mysterious Buddha, 神秘的大佛,

1980). The popularity of kung fu films among viewers explains why the GDR imported at least a dozen kung fu films during the short period of 1983 to 1989. Overall, socialist solidarity prompted film exchange between the GDR and China, except during the Sino-Soviet Split, but, according to my interview with the last general director of DEFA Außenhandel, Helmut Diller, the motive for importing films from China was more economic and market-driven than ideological or political, which certainly explains the reasons for importing genre films.

West German Import of Chinese Films

In the 1950s, for obvious ideological and political reasons West Germany did not screen films from China. There were occasional reports on Chinese cinema in West German newspapers, for instance, during the film festival in Karlovy Vary or other international film festivals. Already in 1951, Chinese films were screened at the Biennale in Venice, but they faced a lot of animosity from the jury. When a Japanese film won that year's Golden Lion, some journalists believed that the prize had not been awarded to the Japanese film, but rather denied to the Chinese film. A West German critic wrote, "Newly made Chinese films began to get on the nerves of some sensitive people in the West, especially in the US, and likely got into their pockets as well. The more Chinese films gain in market share in the Far East, the less chance there is for American films to ever play the dominant role there again."¹⁶ The critic pointed out America's economic motive for sidelining Chinese films, but he advocated distribution of Chinese films in West Germany so that West German audiences could enjoy them.

Importantly, according to the *Hamburger Echo* (December 3, 1958), *Neujahrsopfer* (New Year Sacrifice, 祝福, 1956) was among the very first Chinese films shown in West Germany. It was, however, not released publically in cinemas or on television, but through individual effort

in film clubs such as the one in Hamburg. West German clubs usually screened East German prints that DEFA had synchronized.¹⁷

Over the years, more articles appeared in West German newspapers reporting on the state of the Chinese film industry as the number of films, studios, laboratories, and audience members rapidly increased and the quality of films improved. Whereas East German film critics praised the achievements of New China, West German writers showed great interest in the immense potential of China as a market for German and European films. A 1956 article in *Kölnische Rundschau* reported that in a gigantic country with a population of over 450 million, there were only one thousand cinemas in the Western sense of the word and five thousand so-called “itinerant cinemas” (*Wanderkinos*). But the government-regulated Chinese film industry made only twenty-six feature films and seventy documentary films every year, according to the report. Therefore, there was a huge demand for foreign films to meet domestic needs, and China had established a film agency in Prague to coordinate the purchase of European films. The article also pointed out that other European countries were working hard to gain access to the Chinese market: the Italians and the French had already established a stable relationship with Peking; the first French film week would take place in Beijing at the end of October 1956, followed soon by the first Italian film week.¹⁸ A 1958 article in *Deutsche Woche* pointed out China’s huge need for technical equipment over the next five years as it built new movie theaters and increased the number of *Wanderkinos*: “There are already plans to build movie theaters all the way to the remotest towns and also to reach the last villages through itinerant cinemas. . . . More than 50,000 devices will be needed for the itinerant cinemas alone.”¹⁹

Meanwhile, China was on a path to improve the artistic quality of films in order to increase its exports and its ability to compete on an international level. An article in *Stuttgarter*

Nachrichten reported on the threat China posed to American and Western films' market share, especially in the Afro-Asian bloc. Encouraged by the "Hundred Flowers Bloom" movement (百花齐放, 百家争鸣) in 1956, young artists questioned the tight political control of the film industry and petitioned for a decrease of political and ideological monotony in Chinese films. The successful exporting of the first Chinese color film, the tragic romance *Liang Shan-po* (Butterfly Lovers, 梁山伯与祝英台, 1954), taught Chinese film officials that "less red is better."²⁰ Popular reaction from audiences compelled film officials to adjust their cultural policies, albeit temporarily and to a limited degree. Some reviewers praised the high quality of Chinese films.²¹ Most West German reviews, however, criticized them for being tendentious and schematic "Red Chinese" films that aimed to shape the ideological orientation of the population.²²

In the 1960s, West German sources reported on the anti-rightist, anti-revisionist campaigns Mao waged that banned numerous films as "Giftes Unkraut" (poisonous weeds). The blacklist consisted of about two hundred Chinese films made between 1950 and 1965 that did not align with Mao's ideological tenets.²³ During the Cultural Revolution, only Model Peking Opera (样板戏) films were allowed to be made and exported. Ironically, it was West Germany, not East Germany, that screened the stark socialist realist revolutionary operas.²⁴ On July 22, 1968, *Das rote Frauenbataillon* (Red Detachment of Women, 红色娘子军, 1961) was first shown on West German television.

Shortly before West Germany and China established a diplomatic relationship on October 11, 1972, Chinese films were shown in West Berlin for the first time. In collaboration with the Chinese embassy in Stockholm and a Swedish film club, Arsenal in West Berlin screened four films during June 20–24, 1972, including three revolutionary Peking Opera films: *Die rote*

Laterne (The Red Lantern, 红灯记, 1970), *Der Tigerberg durch Klugheit erobert* (Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy, 智取威虎山, 1970), *Das rote Frauenbataillon* (1961)—and a documentary, *Der 21. Jahrestag der Volksrepublik China* (Twentieth Anniversary of the People's Republic of China, 庆祝伟大的中华人民共和国成立二十周年, 1969). The films ran in their original, unsynchronized version and audience members were provided with a synopsis of the films beforehand.²⁵ The Arsenal cinema, opened a few years earlier by the Friends of the Deutsche Kinemathek, was considered “the most progressive and most interesting” venue in the FRG.²⁶ As a reviewer in *Die Welt* reported, the premieres of these films constituted the unofficial opening of the 1972 Berlinale. The critic further observed that the productions did not convey impressions of everyday life in today's China; nonetheless, they demonstrated a striking blend of traditional Chinese art forms and contemporary agitprop for the benefit of Western spectators. A critic for *Süddeutsche Zeitung* pointed out that primarily “Maoist groups and their metastases” applauded the scenes; he found the decoration and costumes “a feast for bourgeois taste” but deemed the story problematic and irritating.²⁷

Besides revolutionary Peking operas, an anti-imperialist, patriotic feature on the First Opium War between England and China (1839–1842) was shown on ZDF in 1970: *Kein Opium für China* (The Opium Wars, 林则徐, 1959). Indeed, around that time West Germany cautiously began screening Chinese films.

At this historical juncture, an important individual emerged in the Sino-German film trade who became the first West German to vigorously and consistently promote Chinese film in his own country. He was the West German film director, producer, and photographer Manfred Durniok (1934–2003). At the age of thirty-eight, Durniok made his first trip to China via Hong Kong in 1972. He would return to China frequently over the next thirty years before his untimely

death in 2003. Overall, he imported about two hundred Chinese features, documentaries, and animated films.²⁸ He then marketed them primarily to West German television stations, festivals, film weeks, and retrospectives, but also to DEFA Außenhandel and other German-speaking countries.

Durniok's passion for Chinese film coincided with the end of the Cultural Revolution and the opening of China's film archives for export. West German television stations and film festivals were interested in both pre-1949 (pre-PRC) classics and films about the Cultural Revolution and its aftermath. In the late 1970s, a wide range of historical and sociopolitical films were shown: a film set against the backdrop of the Sino-Soviet Split that urged national self-reliance, *Der zweite chinesische Frühling* (The Second Spring, 第二个春天, 1975); a patriotic espionage film, *Drei schwarze Dreiecke* (Three Black Triangles, 黑三角, 1978); a film about the First Sino-Japanese War in 1894, *Die Seeschlacht* (The Naval Battle of 1894, 甲午风云, 1962); and *Orkan* (*The Hurricane*, 暴风骤雨, 1961), a revolutionary drama about the struggle between a group of Communist cadres and a landowner in Manchuria in 1946.

At the 1978 Berlinale, Durniok arranged for a retrospective of Chinese films that included *Orkan*, the anti-Japanese war film *Tunnelkrieg* (Tunnel Warfare, 地道战, 1965), and the full-length animation feature *Affenkönig* (television title: *Aufbruch im Himmel*, Havoc in Heaven, 孙悟空大闹天宫, 1964).²⁹ In 1980, ZDF showed three Chinese films as part of a bilateral television agreement: a pre-1949 family drama about a couple falling apart in the chaos of the Second Sino-Japanese War, *Die Wasser des Frühlingsstromes fließen nach Osten* (The Spring River Flows East, 一江春水向东流, 1947); *Abendregen* (Evening Rain; Chinese title: Evening Rain in the Mountains of Sichuan, 巴山夜雨, 1980), in which two Red Guards transport a

persecuted poet from Chongqing to Shanghai to stand trial during the Cultural Revolution; and *Die Legende vom Tianyun-Gebirge* (Legend of Tianyun Mountain, 天云山传奇, 1980), about the persecution of a cadre during the anti-rightist campaigns.³⁰

The first Chinese film festival in the FRG took place in Mannheim in October 1982 and included films from before 1949 to the present. In the same month, the Arsenal cinema also held a retrospective of Chinese films from 1933 to the present, this time without revolutionary operas.³¹ In 1983, WDR (Westdeutsche Fernsehen) showed on West 3 a series of classic Chinese films, including a story about three women during the Japanese occupation of Shanghai, *Drei moderne Frauen* (Three Women, 丽人行, 1949); a drama about a family in Shanghai who struggled to accommodate relatives from the countryside fleeing from famine in 1945 at the end of the Second Sino-Japanese War, *Das Licht von 10.000 Familien* (Myriads of Lights, 万家灯火, 1948); *Mein ganzes Leben* (This Life of Mine, 我这一辈子, 1950), based on Lao She's novel, in which a Peking policeman recounts his experiences during the tumultuous years between 1911 and 1945; *Abendregen* (under the title *Nächtlicher Regen in den Bergen von Sichuan*); and another film that was not strictly Chinese: *Chan ist verschwunden* (*Chan Is Missing*, 1981) with a Chinese and American cast.³²

In 1984, as part of the German-Chinese cultural exchange, Arsenal organized a Chinese film week sponsored by the Deutsche Institut für Filmkunde, Manfred-Durniok-Produktion, and the China Film Import and Export Corporation, together with the Friends of the Deutsche Kinemathek.³³ In October 1984, Bonn, then the capital of the FRG, held its first Chinese film week, where China for the first time officially presented its films to West German audiences, accompanied by a delegation of important representatives from the film industry. Five films were shown: a socio-critical film about managerial problems and political hierarchy, *Heißes Blut*

(Blood Is Hot, 血, 总是热的, 1983); a love story centering on a shipyard locksmith/writer and the daughter of a publisher that was critical of the Cultural Revolution and propagated the new political order, *Gegenlichtaufnahme* (Countering Lights, 逆光, 1982); *Erinnerungen an das alte Peking* (My Memories of Old Beijing, 城南旧事, 1983); *Der Junge mit der Rikscha* (*Rikschakuli* [GDR title], Rickshaw Boy, 骆驼祥子, 1982), based on Lao She's novel; and *Unter der Brücke* (Under the Bridge, 大桥下面, 1984), a love story featuring a young tailoress and a bicycle repair entrepreneur (个体户) who struggle in the face of petit-bourgeois mentality because she has an illegitimate son. The director of *Heißes Blut*, Wen Yan, candidly spoke with the audience in Bonn about her criticism of Party functionaries. The reviewer wrote that *Heißes Blut* is a living example of the fact that Chinese film production had reconnected with its social-critical tradition of the 1930s and no longer evaded contemporary issues. The five films shown in Bonn were subsequently screened in Berlin, Munich, and Hamburg.³⁴ West German reviews rightly pointed out the lack of sexuality, a symbol of Western decadence, in Chinese films before 1980. Later films catered more to audience tastes as the propaganda ministry in Beijing realized that over-idealization of socialism alienated Chinese moviegoers.³⁵ Romance and martial arts films cast in the mold of Hongkong cinema were manifestations of these new shifts, but contained less sex and violence.

The years 1985–1989 witnessed a flourishing of Chinese film distribution in divided Germany, and Manfred Durniok's contribution cannot be overemphasized. He tirelessly imported critically acclaimed contemporary films made by the so-called fifth-generation Chinese directors, such as *Gelbes Land* (Yellow Earth, 黄土地, 1985), a groundbreaking film that won Chinese cinema international recognition; it won a Silver Leopard at the international film festival in Locarno, Switzerland, in 1985. Writing to Yu Yuxi, his primary contact at the China

Film Import and Export Corporation, Durniok summarized his efforts as follows: “The film *Gelbes Land* will be shown at the Munich film festival. Thirteen films from China will be shown at the ‘Horizon’ event in Berlin. In September I am planning a screening of about eight Chinese films in Hamburg. You see, we are working very diligently for Chinese films.”³⁶

With Durniok’s support, in 1988 the film *Rotes Kornfeld*, Zhang Yimou’s directorial debut, became the first Chinese film to win a Golden Bear at the Berlinale, a breakthrough not only for Zhang but also for Chinese cinema as a whole. Lead actress Gong Li became an audience favorite in Germany. Chinese directors including Zhang Yimou, Huang Jianzhong, and Chen Kaige were Durniok’s personal guests in Berlin.³⁷

West German television stations screened at least sixty-five Chinese films between 1968 and 1989,³⁸ and the reasons were less ideological than political, cultural-historical, and economic. In an interview, the director of the ARD film editorial staff in Frankfurt, Klaus Lackschéwitz, explained why ARD acquired Chinese films:

The People’s Republic of China is the last largely unknown but fascinating country on earth. Besides, the costs of these productions are considerably lower than those of American or French films. I travelled to Beijing myself and selected these three films from about forty films. In my opinion they show especially clearly how the Chinese deal with the problems of the Cultural Revolution and how intensive their confrontation with the past is. Of course, these films could only interest a minority of people—because the scenes contain far too much pathos. But Chinese films are still in a developing stage.³⁹

Due to the lack of a centralized film import and distribution system, Chinese films did not find willing distributors and primarily appeared on broadcast television or at festivals instead of in cinemas. The West German importation of Chinese films relied on the efforts of individuals like Durniok and producers or editors at various television stations. In this context, Durniok played a crucial role in forging cultural and business ties with China and helping to promote the image of China.

Conclusion

Chinese films were an important medium for familiarizing German audiences with China and Chinese people and allowing Germans to see behind the “Bamboo Curtain.”⁴⁰ They served as a tool of enlightenment and corrected many presumptions and prejudices Germans held with respect to China and its people. As a critic wrote in *FAZ*, “The Western imagination of eternally smiling, stoically acquiescing Asians awaits revision: The people in these films have things they must endure, but they’ve also learned to defend themselves; they insist on individual rights, as their ancestors probably would never have even dared, and the films consider such behavior absolutely exemplary.”⁴¹ Thus, no matter what the initial motivation for importing these films, the contribution they made to cultural epistemology was far-reaching and hard to quantify. In turn, the international distribution of Chinese films provided an incentive to modify socialist modernity in China.

Generally speaking, East German reviews of Chinese films were predominantly, and indeed obligatorily, positive, whereas West German reviews were sometimes racist and condescending. But both the East and West German press were surprised at the overall high quality of Chinese films, which depicted a modern, rapidly developing country that the West had

to reckon with. The history of film importation reflects evolving diplomatic relationships between China and both Germanies. The transnational film-cultural history briefly sketched here shows how the bilateral relationship between countries sets the parameters for film trade; once political sanction has been secured, film plays a pioneering role in changing consciousness and mutual perceptions, paving the way for collaborations in other sectors of society.

Filmography

Abendregen (Evening Rain in the Mountains of Sichuan, 巴山夜雨, dir. Wu Yonggang 吴永刚 and Wu Yigong 吴贻弓, 1980, Shanghai Film Studios; 1980 ZDF; 7.12.1983 WDR with the title *Nächtlicher Regen in den Bergen von Sichuan*)

Affenkönig (television title: *Aufbruch im Himmel*, Havoc in Heaven, 孙悟空大闹天宫, dir. Wan Laiming 万籁鸣, Shanghai Animation Film Studio, 1964; 10.5.1980 ARD)

Brücke (Bridge, 桥, dir. Wang Bin 王滨, 1949, Northeast Film Studio)

Chan ist verschwunden (*Chan Is Missing*, dir. Wayne Wang, New Yorker Films, 1981)

Das Licht von 10.000 Familien (Myriads of Lights, 万家灯火, dir. Shen Fu, 1948, Kun Lun Film Studio; 23.11.1983 WDR)

Das rote Frauenbataillon (Red Detachment of Women, 红色娘子军, dir. Xie Jin, 1961, Shanghai Film Studio; 22.7.1968 ARD)

Das siegreiche China (Victory of the Chinese People, 中国人民的胜利, dir. Leonid Warlamow, UdSSR/VR China 1950; 19.1.1951 Kino DDR)

Der 21. Jahrestag der Volksrepublik China (Twentieth Anniversary of the People's Republic of China, 庆祝伟大的中华人民共和国成立二十周年, 1969)

Der geheimnisvolle Buddha (Mysterious Buddha, 神秘的大佛, dir. Zhang Huaxun 张华勋, 1980, Beijing Film Studio; 22.6.1984 Kino DDR; 10.1.1986 DFF 1)

Der Junge mit der Rikscha (*Rikschakuli* [GDR title], Rickshaw Boy, 骆驼祥子, dir. Ling Zifeng 凌子风, 1982, Beijing Film Studio; 31.8.1984 DFF 1; 10.9.1984 ARD);

Der Pferdehirt (The Herdsman, 牧马人, dir. Xie Jin 谢晋, 1981, Shanghai Film Studio; 28.9.1984 Kino DDR)

Der Tigerberg durch Klugheit erobert (Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy, 智取威虎山, dir. Xie Tieli 谢铁骊, 1970, Beijing Film Studio)

Der zweite chinesische Frühling (The Second Spring, 第二个春天, dir. Sang Hu 桑弧 and Wang Xiuwen 王秀文; 1975, Shanghai Film Studio; 11.1.1977 HR)

Die Legende vom Tianyun-Gebirge (Legend of Tianyun Mountain, 天云山传奇, dir. Xie Jin, 1980, Shanghai Film Studio; 1980 ZDF; 19.4.1982 ARD),

Die rote Laterne (The Red Lantern, 红灯记, dir. Cheng Yin, 1970, August 1st Film Studio)

Die Seeschlacht (The Naval Battle of 1894, 甲午风云, dir. Ling Nong 林农, 1962, Changchun Film Studio; 30.9.1979 ZDF)

Die Stadt Hibiskus (Hibiskustown, 芙蓉镇, dir. Xie Jin, 1987, Shanghai Film Studio; 13.1.1989 Kino DDR; 25.9.1989 ARD)

Die Töchter Chinas (Daughters of China, 中华女儿, dir. Ling Zifeng 凌子风 and Zhai Qiang 翟强, 1949, Northeast Film Studio; 7.6.1951 Kino DDR).

Die Wasser des Frühlingsstromes fließen nach Osten (一江春水向东流, dir. Cai Chusheng 蔡楚生 and Zhen Junli 郑君里, 1947, Shanghai Film Studio; 2.11.1980 ZDF)

Die Zauberaster (The Magic Aster, 马兰花, dir. Pan Wenzhan 潘文展 and Meng Yuan 孟远
1960, Shanghai Haiyan Film Studio; 12.07.1963 Kino DDR; 8.2.1984 DFF 2)

Drei moderne Frauen (Three Women, 丽人行, dir. Chen Liting 陈鲤庭, 1949, based on Tian
Han 田汉's script, Kun Lun Film Studio; 16.11.1983 WDR)

Drei schwarze Dreiecke (Three Black Triangles, 黑三角, dir. Liu Chunlin 刘春霖 and Chen
Fangqian 陈方千, 1978, Beijing Film Studio; 25.5.1979 ARD)

Ein Dorf in der Großstadt (A Corner in the City, 都市里的村庄, dir. Teng Wenji 滕文骥, 1982,
Xi'an Film Studio; 6.4.1984 Kino DDR; 19.8.1986 DFF 2)

Erinnerungen an das alte Peking (My Memories of Old Beijing, 城南旧事, dir. Wu Yigong,
1983, Shanghai Film Studio)

Gegenlichtaufnahme (Countering Lights, 逆光, dir. Ding Yinnan 丁荫楠, 1982, Zhujiang Film
Studio; 30.10.1984 ZDF)

Gelbes Land (Yellow Earth, 黄土地, dir. Chen Kaige 陈凯歌, with Zhang Yimou 张艺谋 as the
cinematographer, Guangxi Film Studio, 1985; 21.4.1987 DFF 2; 18.5.1987 ARD)

Heißes Blut (Blood Is Hot, 血, 总是热的, dir. Wen Yan 文彦, Beijing studio, 1983)

Kein Opium für China (The Opium Wars, 林则徐, dir. Zheng Junli 郑君里 and Cen Fan 岑范,
1959, Shanghai Film Studio; 9.8.1970 ZDF).

Liang Shan-po (Butterfly Lovers, 梁山伯与祝英台, dir. Sang Hu 桑弧 and Huang Shalian 黄沙
联, Shanghai Film Studio, 1954)

Mein ganzes Leben (This Life of Mine, 我这一辈子, dir. Shi Hui 石挥, 1950, Wenhua Film
Company; 30.11.1983 WDR)

Neujahrsopfer (New Year Sacrifice, 祝福, dir. Sang Hu 桑弧, 1956, Beijing Film Studio)

Orkan (The Hurricane, 暴风骤雨, dir. Xie Tieli, adapted from Zhou Libo's novel, Beijing Film Studio, 1961; 10.12.1979 ARD),

Rotes Kornfeld (Red Sorghum, 红高粱, dir. Zhang Yimou 张艺谋, 1987, Xi'an Film Studio; 4.10.1989 ZDF [synchr.], 10.11.1989 Kino DDR)

Sonne über China. Bei Freunden zu Besuch (Liberated China, 解放了的中国, dir. Sergej Gerassimow, UdSSR/VR China, 1950; 27.4.1951 Kino DDR).

Stählerne Kämpfer (Steel Soldiers, 钢铁战士, dir. Cheng Yin 成荫, 1950, Northeast Film Studio; 18.4.1952 Kino DDR)

Tapfere Herzen (Arise United toward Tomorrow, 团结起来到明天, dir. Zhao Ming 赵明, 1950, Shanghai Film Studio; 30.4.1954 Kino DDR; 1.10.1954 DFF 1)

Teufelskrallen (Chopping the Devil's Claws, 斩断魔爪, dir. Shen Fu 沈浮, 1954, Shanghai Film Studio; 8.7.1955 Kino DDR; 5.8.1955 DFF 1)

Tunnelkrieg (Tunnel Warfare, 地道战, dir. Ren Xudong 任旭东, 1965, August 1st Film Studio; 19.8.1974 ARD),

Unter der Brücke (Under the Bridge, 大桥下面, dir. Bai Chen 白沉, 1984, Shanghai Film Studio; 15.10.1985 DFF 2; 28.10.1985 ARD)

Weißer Lotosblüte (White Lotus, 白莲花, dir. Zhong Shuhuang 中叔皇 and Sun Yongping 孙永平, 1980, Shanghai Film Studio; 24.3.1984 DFF 2)

¹ Heinz Kersten, "Mao reformiert die Oper: Die 'Freunde der Deutschen Cinemathek' zeigten in Westberlin chinesische Filme von heute," *Kölner-Stadt-Anzeiger*, July 11, 1972. All translations

are mine unless otherwise noted.

² The filmography at the end of this chapter contains more data about directors, studios, and premiere dates in East and/or West Germany. The majority of these Chinese films are available on YouTube.

³ Toni Kase, “Chinas Filme nicht zur Unterhaltung,” *Rhein-Neckar-Zeitung*, Heidelberg, December 25, 1960; “Reißer aus Rotchina,” *Welt am Sonntag*, West Berlin, February 4, 1973.

⁴ Heinz Knobloch, trans., “Der Film als Waffe für Chinas Befreiung: Vom abergläubischen Mischmasch zur Gradheit und Realistik / Von Tsai Chu-sheng,” *BZ am Abend*, East Berlin, January 9, 1951.

⁵ “Eine überraschende Bekanntschaft: Das Gesicht des neuen chinesischen Films,” *Deutsche Woche*, Munich, October 24, 1951.

⁶ Knobloch, “Der Film als Waffe für Chinas Befreiung.”

⁷ E.g., “Filmbrief aus Peking: Die große Wandlung,” *Der Film Spiegel*, Berlin, October 1955.

⁸ Curt [*sic*] Maetzig, “Begegnung mit chinesischem Film. Von Nationalpreisträger Dr. Curt Maetzig,” *BZ am Abend*, East Berlin, August 14, 1950.

⁹ Herman Müller, “‘Die Töchter Chinas’: Der erste Spielfilm junger chinesischer Künstler begeistert in der DDR aufgenommen,” *Neues Deutschland*, June 9, 1951; Wolfgang Joho, “‘Die Töchter Chinas,’” *Sonntag*, June 17, 1951.

¹⁰ --schke, “‘Die stählernen Kämpfer’ / Ein neuer chinesischer Film,” *Friedenspost*, August 26, 1951.

¹¹ Siegfried Schröder, “‘Tapfere Herzen’: Ein neuer chinesischer Film,” *Junge Welt*, May 21, 1954.

¹² Bundesarchiv Lichterfelde. DR 1 / 14893.

¹³ Bundesarchiv Lichterfelde. DR 1 / 14893.

¹⁴ Bundesarchiv Lichterfelde. HV Film; Abt. Filmzulassung; Aktenvermerk, nur für den Dienstgebrauch, Berlin den 23.9.82.

¹⁵ Bundesarchiv Lichterfelde. Berlin, den 4.7.1983; Dr. Kr. / Tou. HV Film – Abt. Filmzulassung; Bericht. Aufenthalt in der VR China, 29.4–9.5.1983. Mitglieder: Gen. Dr. Erhard Kranz, Herbert Bulla, and Heinz Liebeskind.

¹⁶ “Eine überraschende Bekanntschaft: Das Gesicht des neuen chinesischen Films,” *Deutsche Woche*, Munich, October 24, 1951.

¹⁷ h. “Geistervertreibung in Mao Tse-tungs Reich: ‘Neujahrsopfer’: Ein Farbfilm aus China – Vorführung beim Hamburger Filmclub,” *Hamburger Echo*, December 3, 1958.

¹⁸ Gustav Genschow, “Größter Filmmarkt der Erde? Platz auch für europäische Filme – in China,” *Kölnische Rundschau*, November 24, 1956.

¹⁹ “Der Aufbau der chinesischen Filmindustrie: Chancen für den West-Ost-Handel,” *Deutsche Woche*, Munich, December 10, 1958.

²⁰ Werner Lammers, “Weniger rot geht besser: China kommt auf leisen Sohlen,” *Stuttgarter Nachrichten*, December 2, 1960.

²¹ PvB. “Chinas Hollywood heißt Kanton,” *Spandauer Volksblatt*, Berlin, October 25, 1957; ff. “Das Hollywood des Ostens: Rotchinesische Filme überrunden westlichen Import,” *Nordwest Zeitung – Oldenburger Nachrichten*, October 26, 1957.

²² *Der Tag*, West Berlin, February 14, 1960; NP., “18 000 fahrbare Kinos in Rotchina,” *Augsburger Allgemeine*, May 5, 1961.

²³ Christain R. “Brief aus Hongkong,” *Berliner Morgenpost*, West Berlin, December 1, 1964; Franz Theodor Zölch (Munich), “‘Giftiges Unkraut’: Vom Untergang der chinesischen Filmkunst,” *National Zeitung*, Basel, August 25, 1969.

²⁴ For more on the GDR’s reaction to Mao’s Cultural Revolution, see Quinn Slobodian, “The Maoist Enemy: China’s Challenge in 1960s East Germany,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 2016, Vol. 51 (3) 635-659.

²⁵ “Chinesische Filme erstmals in Berlin,” *Der Tagesspiegel*, West Berlin, May 16, 1972; Anneliese Gottschalk, “Ein Instrument der Schulung: Filme aus der Volksrepublik China werden im ‘Arsenal’ vorgeführt,” *Spandauer Volksblatt*, West Berlin, June 14, 1972; A.B., “Seltene Blicke in ein fremdes Land: Das Arsenal zeigt interessante Filme aus Rotchina,” *Berliner Morgenpost*, West Berlin, June 15, 1972.

²⁶ Ruth Köhler, “Tanzen und Schießen: Filme aus Rot-China zum ersten Male in Berlin gezeigt,” *Trierische Landeszeitung*, Trier, June 24, 1972.

²⁷ Wolfgang Limmer, “Positive Helden und frische Tomaten: Filme aus der Volksrepublik China im Berliner Arsenal,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, June 27, 1972.

²⁸ Yu Yuxi, “Manfred Durniok and China,” *Manfred Durniok - Films & Friends*, Berlin: Verlag Das Neue Berlin; Manfred Durniok Produktion für Film und Fernsehen, 1996. 188-189.

²⁹ Ron Holloway, “Portrait of a Cosmopolite and Film Producer,” *Manfred Durniok - Films & Friends*, 140–141, here 140.

³⁰ “Chinesische Spielfilme als Geschichtsunterricht: Das ZDF zeigt drei chinesische Produktionen im Rahmen des Fernsehabkommens,” *General-Anzeiger*, November 1, 1980.

³¹ La., “Hundert Blumen werden blühen . . . Die erste Retrospektive des chinesischen Films in der BRD,” *Rhein-Neckar-Zeitung*, October 4, 1982; “Politik per Leinwand: Mannheimer

Filmwoche bot Rückblick auf chinesische Produktion,” *Südkurier*, October 11, 1982; Andreas Oswald, “Das Arsenal zeigt eine Auswahl chinesischer Spielfilme von 1933 bis 1981. Aus der Distanz China verstehen lernen,” *Volksblatt*, October 16, 1982.

³² Arnold Hohmann, “Vom Joch der Japaner bis zur Herrschaft der Viererbande: Spielfilm-Reihe im WDR bietet Einblicke in die wechselvolle Geschichte Chinas,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, November 23, 1983.

³³ K.H., “Arsenal-Kino präsentiert Filme aus Fernost. Chinesisches im Gegenlicht,” *Berliner Morgenpost*, October 21, 1984.

³⁴ Kirsten Baukhage, “Eiertanz des Managements: Chinesischer Film kritisiert Funktionäre,” *Offenbach-Post*, October 25, 1984.

³⁵ “Chinesische Spielfilme als Geschichtsunterricht,” *General-Anzeiger*, November 1, 1980.

³⁶ Deutsche Kinemathek, Durniok Nachlassarchiv. I thank Mr. Gerrit Thies for granting me access to Durniok’s archives.

³⁷ *Manfred Durniok - Films & Friends*, 186.

³⁸ Deutsche Kinemathek, Online Database.

³⁹ T. O. Hamburg, “China-Filme sind erheblich billiger...,” *Welt am Sonntag*, West Berlin, July 12, 1981.

⁴⁰ Toni Kase, “Chinas Filme nicht zur Unterhaltung,” *Rhein-Neckar-Zeitung*, Heidelberg, December 25, 1960.

⁴¹ Hans-Dieter Seidel, “Vorschau: Vier Filme aus der Volksrepublik China. Strom der Geschichte und Geschichten,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, October 14, 1985.