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**A Question of Ideology and Realpolitik:
DEFA's Cold War Documentaries on China**

Qinna Shen

During the Cold War, the ideological concepts of anti-colonialism, anti-imperialism, and anti-capitalism were paradigmatic to communist internationalism and the solidarity movement among socialist countries.¹ Socialism presented itself as the vanguard of peace in the world and capitalism as historically connected with colonialism and, after WWII, with the further economic exploitation of the Third World by various means. The postwar era witnessed civil wars, national divisions, and anti-colonial struggles in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. These continents also became the sites where Cold War rivals demonstrated their political, ideological, economic, and cultural prowess.² As a Soviet satellite state, the German Democratic Republic (GDR) not only nurtured its ties with the Soviet bloc countries in Eastern Europe, but also with socialist regimes in the Third World.³ This essay concentrates on the bilateral relationship between the GDR and the People's Republic of China (PRC) and how the GDR's state-sponsored film company, DEFA (Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft), represented China so as to assist the Central European country's foreign policy toward the socialist brother country in East Asia. Instead of fictional films, DEFA primarily used documentaries to introduce domestic audiences to other socialist countries, in this case China, while locating the GDR within the world arena.

Ideological common ground shared by states belonging to the socialist camp obviously provided the basis for bringing the geographically and culturally distant countries of the GDR and China together. China was one of the eleven countries, all of them communist, that recognized the GDR upon its founding in 1949 by establishing diplomatic relations as early as 25

October 1949. Although the PRC also faced diplomatic “containment” campaigns led by the US, Western countries as well as the nonaligned world were generally readier to accept Mao’s China than the island regime in Taiwan. The United Kingdom, e.g., recognized the PRC on 5 January 1950 out of economic considerations. The GDR, in contrast, had a fierce, unrelenting, and also stronger rival. Capitalizing on its economic superiority, the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) engaged in a rigorous isolation campaign against East Germany from 1949 until the early 1970s. In December 1955, the FRG announced publicly that it would break diplomatic relations with any country that established similar relations with the GDR. This controversial but very effective foreign policy was dubbed the Hallstein Doctrine in 1958 after the hawkish foreign secretary, Walter Hallstein. Facing this diplomatic blockade, any official or *de facto* recognition was strategically important for the fledgling socialist GDR in its competition for international legitimacy. Thus the GDR persistently, though with limited success, pursued recognition from the nonaligned world.⁴ Drawing the short stick in terms of realpolitik, the GDR played up the ideological card by both aligning its own struggles with the anti-imperialist cause in Third World countries and expressing solidarity with indigenous leftist forces in their fight for national self-determination. Referring to the GDR’s foreign policies of *Annäherung* and *Abgrenzung*, Thomas Barnett remarks, “In essence, the South supplied East Germany with much of what it needed to maintain its two-track policy of ‘drawing together’ with the Soviet Union and ‘delimitation’ with West Germany.”⁵

Historical Background

Unlike the superimposed communist regime in the GDR, China's communist movement started soon after the October Revolution in Russia and built a mass base in the populace through its fight against the Japanese and against Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang. Therefore, China could serve as an "ideological mirror" and an exhilarating success story of communist struggle for East German propaganda purposes years before the 1960s national liberation movements in many Latin American, African, and Middle-Eastern nations.⁶ The revolutionary precedent of China and its staunch commitment to Marxism-Leninism reassured East Germans of the correctness of their own socialist path and served as a form of self-validation. With regard to the foreign policy of the GDR in Africa, Thomas Barnett views the South as providing ersatz revolutionary pathos for East Germany: "If East Berlin could not generate any true revolutionary spirit at home, surrogates had to be found in the South. The vicarious thrills of precipitating revolutions abroad were thus substituted for the bastard legacy of the East German state."⁷ China's revolutionary history was borrowed to rally support and create enthusiasm for socialism in the GDR. Moreover, the DEFA depictions of the epic struggle of Chinese communists under Mao would evoke the fight of German communists against the Nazis and thereby corroborate the East German founding myth.

For China, on the other hand, the GDR was a Germany freed from Western imperialism. Mao promised full support for the GDR's struggle toward a unified, independent, democratic, and peaceful Germany. China's first Premier Zhou Enlai paid a state visit to the GDR in July 1954, where the two countries signed a joint German-Chinese communiqué. Zhou described the GDR as a bulwark against Western capitalism and endorsed a peaceful reunification of Germany

under socialist auspices. In return, the GDR's first Prime Minister Otto Grotewohl visited China in 1955 and emphasized China's significance in the resolution of international problems. Both sides spoke out against the re-militarization of West Germany and Japan. The GDR supported China's demands for a withdrawal of US troops from Taiwan as well as for the admission of China into the United Nations.⁸ Both the GDR and China resisted Khrushchev's de-Stalinization campaigns. China also helped the GDR with material goods to overcome some of the shortages that led to the workers' revolt on 17 June 1953.⁹ Under the leadership of Walter Ulbricht, a GDR delegation attended the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) 8th Party Congress in October 1956, where the very first direct conversation between the two government leaders, Ulbricht and Mao, took place.¹⁰ It was the GDR rather than Moscow that supported the CCP's most prominent initiatives—the Great Leap Forward of 1958 to 1960 and the People's Commune—because the GDR hoped to learn from China's collectivization measures so as to solve its own agricultural problems.¹¹ This demonstrates that the GDR maintained, when possible, some independence from the USSR in its foreign policy. It also reveals how much knowledge from the Third World was integral to the GDR's own domestic policies.

However, when the alliance between China and the Soviet Union fractured and the Soviet Union recalled all its experts in 1960, the GDR was compelled to avow its allegiance to the Soviets. Fundamental ideological disagreements lay at the basis of the Sino-Soviet Split, according to Lorenz M. Lüthi. However, the Split could also be seen in real-political issues such as the socioeconomic development model, de-Stalinization, and Khrushchev's policy of peaceful coexistence with the United States.¹² The GDR tried to mediate between the two large socialist powers with "a genuine desire to maintain socialist solidarity and prevent the formation of a Beijing-Bonn axis."¹³ Yet in the face of the Sino-Soviet dispute, the GDR did not really have a

choice but to side with Moscow. The tension between China and the GDR built up in 1960 as the SED adopted the Soviet take on the People's Commune. A public break came during the SED's 6th Party Congress in January 1963. However, couched in every criticism of China voiced by the GDR leaders was the hope that Moscow and Peking would reconcile. China, on the other hand, continued to declare its support for the GDR in the latter's competition with the FRG. In the early 1970s though, China modified its foreign policy and began to seek allies in the West. Bloody clashes with Soviet troops near the Usuri River in March 1969 and in Xinjiang in August 1969 precipitated China's political re-orientation toward the West. Subsequently, China succeeded in establishing diplomatic relations with many Western countries, including the FRG in October 1972. East Berlin saw this new development with great concern because China also supported NATO, Western European integration, and finally German reunification. China's open attempts at strategic cooperation with the West reached their climax with the forming of a world-wide "anti-hegemonic" and "anti-Soviet" united front including the US, Japan, and Western Europe. By that time, realpolitik had trumped the ideology of communist internationalism, or rather that ideology had been revised to better serve national interests. As a result, the relationship between China and the GDR in both political and cultural spheres was broken until the end of the 1970s, except when it came to formal contacts on official occasions.¹⁴

In the early 1980s, the European *détente* deteriorated, which prompted the Soviet government to signal readiness to reconnect with China by stopping all military actions on the Soviet-Chinese border. The GDR jumped at this sign and rekindled its friendship with China; subsequently, exchanges in various areas, above all in culture and trade, picked up in speed and volume. The rapprochement was highlighted by Erich Honecker's visit to China in 1986 and the return visit a year later by the General Secretary of China, Zhao Ziyang. The resumed friendship

between the GDR and China, brief due to the GDR's collapse in 1989, ended in a notorious political maneuver. Since both governments remained politically conservative and dogmatic, they rejected Gorbachev's liberal politics as causing destabilization to the system. The SED was one of the few foreign governments that endorsed the Chinese government's military suppression of the democratic movement on 4 July 1989.¹⁵ This scandalous endorsement is mentioned as one of the reasons for the mass exodus of GDR citizens across the Austrian-Hungarian border, one of the key developments that finally culminated in the bringing down of the Wall.¹⁶ Shortly before reunification, the first democratically elected People's Chamber revoked the previous support for the crackdown on the Chinese student movement.¹⁷

DEFA's China Documentaries of the 1950s

This essay explores this bilateral history through the lens of the rarely-screened DEFA documentaries on China. The 1950s China films were doomed to oblivion due to the onset of the Sino-Soviet Split around 1960. Moreover, these films were made before the International Week for Documentary and Short Films in Leipzig was revived in 1960. Henceforth, they have been eclipsed in recent scholarship on DEFA documentaries of Vietnam and Latin America (especially Cuba and Chile), as the latter documentaries enjoyed a favored presence at this film festival. The essay correlates this neglected film history with state relations shaped by political events, the most significant of which certainly being the Sino-Soviet Split. The two-decade long Split in the 1960s and 1970s left only brief windows of opportunity for joint film projects. Nevertheless, DEFA films on China outnumber by far all the films about other East Asian

countries combined, a fact that certainly has to do with the overriding geopolitical significance of China in Asia.

This essay observes a trajectory in the roles that ideology and propaganda play in these films spanning four decades. The early DEFA films on China usually account for how socialism liberated the country from the clutches of feudalism and colonial imperialism and show how the Chinese were now building a socialist state. A strong ideological agenda determines the films' aesthetics and content. In the late 1970s and 1980s, the films shifted from being ideologically pronounced to focusing more on economic, technological, and consumerist achievements of China's modernization. This shift reflects the rise of globalized capitalism and shows how, over the course of decades, the GDR lost much of its revolutionary energy. Ideology gradually gave way to *realpolitik*. By way of examining the films, the essay addresses the fundamental relationship between ideology and *realpolitik*. Given the ideological imperatives of the Cold War, transnational identification based on ideological consensus was inevitable and often translated into real political and economic gains. However, there exists a constant tension between historically transcendent themes—such as solidarity, internationalism, socialism—and real-political expediency for which ideology is counterproductive and thus self-defeating within the realist paradigm of bilateral relations. Especially after the Sino-Soviet Split, *realpolitik* often took precedence over ideology, which became more moderate and was less emphasized. The later technologically and ethnographically oriented films of the 1980s avoid some of the tendentiousness of earlier propaganda by focusing on economic and socio-cultural issues. Although the films of the 1980s still conform to the conventions of socialist realism, the anti-colonial and anti-imperialist tone is generally less strident, reflecting the fact that the GDR had

been accepted into the United Nations in 1973 and faced a new political reality, domestically and internationally.

Before the first DEFA documentary devoted to China— Bruno Kleberg’s *Starke Freunde im fernen Osten* (*Strong Friends in the Far East*, 1956)—appeared, the Dutch documentarist Joris Ivens, employed by DEFA at the time, made two multinational anthology films with significant Chinese episodes. His 1954 productivist hymn, *Lied der Ströme* (*Song of the Rivers*), uses six rivers—the Mississippi, the Ganges, the Nile, the Yangtze, the Volga, and the Amazon—as a poetic metaphor and revolutionary trope to parallel man’s conquest of nature and the international socialist struggle.¹⁸ The Chinese episode focuses on building a dam across the Yangtze River with the assistance of Soviet machines and tractors from Leningrad. The “dam” was the era’s common hydrological metaphor for socialist nation building.¹⁹ The episode starts with “lives were so cheap on the river banks of Yangtze” and ends with “nothing is more valuable than a human being.” The argument that socialism allows human lives to become valuable is typical of the rhetorical strategy within the socialist humanist paradigm. Not a documentary per se, Ivens’s *Die Windrose* (*The Compass Rose*, 1957) was made for the Women’s International Democratic Federation and depicts the intertwinement of class and gender struggles. It consists of five segments from five countries—Brazil, the Soviet Union, France, Italy, and China, each an independent story about a woman’s battle for change.²⁰ In the Chinese segment, Chen Hsiu Hua, the first female brigade leader in her village, overcomes difficulties in her fight against the agricultural collective’s patriarchal biases against women. Despite the divide of language and culture, women in the West and East are shown to share the common goal of defying sexism and patriarchal domination. The film attempts to unify people

around the globe in the cause of socialism, and the appeal for gender equality strengthens the case for socialism's ability to achieve a just society.

Not until 1956 did DEFA make its first full-length film about China. Many reasons contributed to this belated beginning. In the first half of the 1950s, both the GDR and China were preoccupied with their own specific domestic issues. The geographical distance and transportation difficulties due to the lack of an international seaport in the GDR did not make China an easy destination. However, the Rostock harbor was expanded into an international port during the second half of the 1950s.²¹ In 1956, then, DEFA set its own record in terms of international documentaries, making ten documentaries that deal with foreign subjects, with only one of them concerned with the West German adversary but two of them with China: *Strong Friends in the Far East* and Joop Huisken's prize-winning color film *China—Land zwischen gestern und morgen* (*China—A Country between Yesterday and Tomorrow*, 1956, premiered in 1957). From then on, foreign reportage was firmly established within DEFA's annual production plan. It turned out that DEFA needed such "exotic backdrops" in order to refresh its industry films, whose aesthetics had become stagnant.²² Within a few years (1956-61), DEFA produced six documentaries on China. These documentaries also served in part as ethnographical travel reportages. They demystified China and provided East Germans with a means to travel vicariously with the camera. However, such virtual travels came with an ideological package that aimed to convince domestic viewers of the legitimacy of their country's political superstructure. Thus, in addition to ethnographic representations of the people abroad, the political and ideological agendas of these films determine the choice of stories, images, sound tracks, and the voice-over narration. The pervasive rhetoric of the Cold War is embedded in the ubiquitous "voice of God" commentary. It plays an instrumental role in these documentaries, which, as Bill

Nichols points out, “[rely] heavily upon narrative or expository codes.”²³ The burden lies on the narrator to contextualize the images and extract the ideological and political significance of the represented reality.

Usually starting with the feudal and semi-colonial history of the Old China, these films then highlight felicitous changes in the New China. The revolutionary history of the CCP is sketched while visiting major Chinese cities. Historic and touristic sites such as the Forbidden City and the Temple of Heaven in Beijing are included so as to provide virtual tours of China for East German viewers, but the narrative voice reminds them that these imperial places were not accessible to the average Chinese people until the PRC was founded. In Nanjing, the films pay respect to the mausoleum of Sun Yat-sen as the founding father of the first Chinese Republic. Shanghai’s colonial past is invariably evoked when the famous promenade—the Bund, with its Western architecture—is shown. In Shanghai, the house in which the CCP was founded is a recurring shot in the films. Sites in Canton that commemorate revolutionaries are accompanied with a salutary voice-over, for example in *Strong Friends in the Far East*: “The victims of the revolution will never die!”²⁴ Ideological affinity compels DEFA to place China’s communist revolution in its historical context and to emphasize the difference the new government has made. Critical engagement does not occur with regard to any aspect of the Chinese revolution under Mao or the government policies. Besides the revolutionary aspects of China, these films also focus on economic and technical-scientific achievements, such as building infrastructure like dams, bridges, railroads, and transportation systems, thus stressing the role technology plays in developing socialist modernity. The dam is the symbol of the New China and is compared to the Great Wall as the symbol of the Old China.

Strong Friends in the Far East (1956) was occasioned by a state visit. In December 1955, a GDR delegation led by Otto Grotewohl toured China, North Korea, and Mongolia, socialist countries that “offered a secure ideological backdrop for waving the East German flag.”²⁵ Bruno Kleberg, who was in charge of propaganda films at the DEFA studio and was one of the most in-demand directors in the early 1950s, accompanied Grotewohl to China and made *Strong Friends in the Far East* as a result.²⁶ During his official address Grotewohl hands over volumes of the *Yong Le Encyclopedia*, which was compiled in the Ming Dynasty, and flags from the Boxer Rebellion to Zhou Enlai: “As German socialists, descendants of Marx and Engels, we place these flags in your hands.” Returning what was “looted by German imperialists” underscores the GDR’s attempt to present itself as “the German country with no ‘stain’ of past colonialism,” and its rival as “unrepentantly reviving the kind of imperialist, Machiavellian foreign policy associated with Germany’s evil past.”²⁷ The return of the Boxer Rebellion flags reveals East Germany’s sympathetic view of the rebellion as a peasant revolution against feudal and imperialistic oppression, the official interpretation of the controversial revolt in the PRC.²⁸ The GDR’s friendly gesture endorses the rebellion as an emancipatory act, a spiritual and political predecessor of the socialist revolution, thus symbolically marking its severance from Germany’s imperial past.

In 1956, Ivens’s student Joop Huisken shot *China—A Country between Yesterday and Tomorrow* with two Chinese camera assistants in cooperation with the French studio Procinext.²⁹ The temporal metaphor in the title already makes clear that this documentary portrays present-day China as a land in transition. The film describes accomplishments and points out deficiencies but the tone always remains positive: “Small factories exist next to big ones; this is necessary in a period of transition.” In a scene where laborers are hauling a ship upstream, the voice-over

confidently anticipates future change: “Manpower precedes machines; there are no other alternatives; but it will change.” A similar scene of towing a boat appears in Bertolt Brecht’s pre-revolutionary didactic play *Die Maßnahme* (*The Measures Taken*, 1929/30). However, Brecht uses the image of physical labor in the context of political agitation: through their plight the coolies should achieve political consciousness and at least demand more robust shoes that can resist the slippery riverside. Huisken’s film predicts that with the advancement of technology the socialist state will soon relieve the boat trackers from physical toil. The positive outlook the film holds toward China reflects the headstrong optimism of the Marxist-Leninist worldview that socialism paves the way for mankind’s bright future.³⁰

China—A Country between Yesterday and Tomorrow reflects the influence of the director’s mentor, Joris Ivens, who inclines to let individual protagonists emerge from the anonymous masses to tell collective stories.³¹ In this vein, Huisken’s film also zooms in on and selects its semi-protagonists—a soldier in the city, a couple from the countryside who is soon to be wedded, and a female engineer who leads a railroad construction project, thereby creating mini-vignettes within the flow of the film. Resembling techniques employed in ethnographic films, which commonly “depict individual characters, but ... focus their attention upon a level of abstraction beyond the individual,” Huisken maintains this level of abstraction and does not personalize the narrative to the degree that a fiction film does.³² The episodes surrounding these characters all portray them in the context of their work and thus emphasize the productive capacity, both industrial and agricultural, of the New China. The film also uses Ivens’s strategy of reconstructing events by restaging them after they have already taken place, treading a fine line between documentary and fiction.³³

On the side of a road in Beijing, the solderer establishes his “mini-factory” to repair a cracked pot. In a moment of exemplary montage accompanied by oriental string music, the fire the solderer makes in his melting pot transitions to sparks in a steel mill, contrasting the solderer’s simple, low-tech, and improvised work station with a large-scale industrial site. The solderer carries his gear to an industrial complex, takes a break, and smiles at what he sees; his smile seems to acknowledge the humbleness of his artisan craft and appreciate the socialist achievement of industrialization. In this moment, tradition meets modernity, and the two exist side by side in the period of transition (Figure 5.1). As the narrator comments, “Truly, he stands with the melting pot in his hand in the midst of the melting pot of the times.”³⁴



Figure 5.1. *China—A Country between Yesterday and Tomorrow* screenshot: © DEFA-

Stiftung/Robert Ménégos, Jean Penzer, Joop Huisken

On one level, the melting pot of the times (“Schmelztiegel der Zeit”) refers, in Ernst Bloch’s term of “the simultaneity of the non-contemporaneous” (“die Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichen”), to the coexistence of traditional and modern means of production.³⁵ On another level, it also implies, perhaps unconsciously, the different development phases that the GDR and China find themselves in. Whereas China is just making its first steps in the industrial direction, the GDR can boast an advanced, modern socialist state. Thus the film betrays an orientalist tinge, despite the fact that the shared communist ideology makes the filmmakers greatly receptive to Chinese history and culture.

In the rural sequence, the bride-to-be and her two bridesmaids are seen harvesting rice. A little subplot is staged, in which the girlfriends poke fun at the bride-to-be for absent-mindedly threshing empty straw, because she is thinking about her groom and the upcoming wedding. The film uses a country wedding to point out that the old custom of arranged marriages has been abolished in the New China: “In this way, the old forms were kept, but the content is new; the coercion is gone; the bride is not sold off anymore; the marriage is no longer a business; the bride and the groom have chosen each other themselves. And out of free will they choose their own path, which leads them into the future.” A marriage based on free choice becomes an emblematic representation of the happiness inherent in socialist life (Figure 2).



Figure 5.2. *China—A Country between Yesterday and Tomorrow* screenshot: © DEFA-Stiftung/Robert Ménégos, Jean Penzer, Joop Huisken

The increased gender equality is further demonstrated in the episode of the female engineer leading a railroad construction, as well as images of women tractor drivers. The film portrays heroic achievements in production with a gender-conscious choice of stories.

The travel reportage *Von Wismar nach Schanghai* (*From Wismar to Shanghai*, 1958) by Rudolf Schemmel about the maiden voyage of a 10,000-ton freighter named “Friendship” to Shanghai does not focus on international trade per se and does not even mention what GDR products are on the East German vessel. It only mentions Chinese specialty goods that the efficient and hard-working stevedores upload for the journey home. China routinely exported

foodstuffs and raw materials to the GDR whereas the GDR traded with machinery and high-tech products. As William Gray notes, officials in East Berlin ordinarily preferred to trade by barter. Very much like the West Germans, they also favored technical assistance programs over substantial financial commitments in the Third World.³⁶ Following the Soviet Union's footsteps in supporting China's industrialization and modernization, the GDR as well as some other Eastern European countries sent specialists to China and launched projects, many of which were abandoned halfway after the Soviet Union pulled out all its experts in 1960, a manifestation of the Soviet penchant for "punishing" the Global South when it did not conform to the whims of the USSR. The reason for the film to be evasive about the trade might be, as Thomas Barnett observes, that the GDR preferred highlighting differences from West Germany, while in fact the GDR's export pattern resembled that of the FRG.³⁷ Henceforth, in the DEFA films of the 1950s, the preoccupation with political and ideological solidarity overshadowed concrete economic transactions between East Germany and China. *From Wismar to Shanghai* likewise deemphasizes trade to highlight its main interest, the construction of a political and propagandistic narrative.

During the voyage recorded in the form of journal entries, the narrator of *From Wismar to Shanghai* laments Algeria's and Yemen's continuing colonial status: "Over there lies the coast of Algeria. A French gunship; how much longer will they cruise here? The most beautiful island of Malta; how much longer will Malta be the bomber base for the US fleet and NATO's marine headquarters?" The voice-over points to the Algerian National Liberation Front's (FLN) anti-colonial struggle against the French, which is the focal point of another DEFA documentary, *Flammendes Algerien (Algeria in Flames, 1958)*. When passing Indonesia, the voice-over hails Indonesia's recent national sovereignty from "Dutch imperialism," reflecting the socialist camp's

position on this issue. As Young-sun Hong puts it, “While the United States and its allies opposed anti-colonial and liberation movements in Indochina, Algeria, Cuba, and the Congo during this period, both China and the Soviet bloc supported these movements in their struggle against ‘racialized systems of oppression.’”³⁸ Especially after the FRG joined NATO on 9 May 1955 and the GDR became a Warsaw Pact member in January 1956, DEFA documentarists endeavored to antagonize the Cold War enemies.³⁹ Criticism of West Germany’s rearmament and its new status as America’s junior partner became staple subjects in DEFA documentaries until the end of 1950s.

With three films made in a row, Gerhard Jentsch’s accounts of China matter-of-factly capture the *Zeitgeist* at the time of the Great Leap Forward of 1958 to 1960 and the People’s Commune, and are valuable *Zeitdokumente*, products of the time. *Wir berichten aus Pan Yü* (*We Report from Pan Yü*, 1959) visits Pan Yü as one example out of tens of thousands of communes in China and witnesses its operations and achievements. The film explains to its viewers at home the rationale of the Chinese government to introduce the People’s Commune: “The Party said, ‘how much easier must it be if we overcome the difficulties together and do everything together,’ thus came the People’s Commune into existence.” To the soundtrack of Chinese propaganda songs in praise of the CCP, the German voice-over relays the official rhetoric of the Chinese government, e.g., “China will become an industrial country and will even catch up with England before 2062,” echoing a famous slogan at the time, “Surpass Britain, Catch Up with America” (超英赶美). The visual sequences show the harvesting of large-size potatoes, supporting, to some degree, the fallacious slogan “You can harvest as much as you dare” (人有多大胆，地有多大产). The small backyard steel furnaces that were made to produce steel out of scrap metal—another disastrous mass campaign Mao started—were also recorded, but the voice-over fails to

point out the lack of a scientific basis for such primitive means of steel production, which resulted in unusable steel. Instead it uncritically promotes the official statistics: “In China the steel production doubled from 1957 to 1958.” With montages of collective work scenes depicting harvesting, brick making, and house building, this DEFA documentary aims to show the power of the collective at a time when the GDR itself was in the process of agricultural collectivization and nationalization (Figure 5.3).



Figure 5.3. *We Report from Pan Yü* screenshot: © DEFA-Stiftung/Peter Sbrzesny

In a euphoric tone, the narrator gives voice to his belief that the work ethic and collective wisdom of the Chinese will enable them to overcome whatever difficulties there might be in the future:

650 million people have freed themselves from colonialism and exploitation. With diligence and ingenuity, they work hard to remove the dirt of the past. Although machines and tools are still lacking, they will be here tomorrow, because the strength of the people who are on the march to socialism is inexhaustible. The People's Commune is good, says Mao Zedong. We saw Pan Yü, one of approximately 26,000 People's Communes, led by the Party and its great idea of making the leap forward.

In retrospect, the whole question of the People's Commune appears as a tortured one in the GDR. Ulbricht's above-mentioned journey to the CCP's 8th Party Congress to learn about how the Chinese approached agricultural collectivization suggests that the GDR in the late 1950s was really interested in acquiring new ideas from China. Jentsch's films in support of the People's Commune were thus in keeping with SED policy. In 1960, however, the policy changed so as to follow Soviet criticism of the Commune.⁴⁰ As a result, the newly made films became instantly outdated and "politically displaced," a fate common to propaganda in politically volatile times.⁴¹

East Germany not only sent scientists, technicians, and students to socialist brother countries, but also artistic ensembles "to spread the word about the 'first workers-and-peasants-state on German soil.'"⁴² Jentsch's 1959 documentary *Wir sangen und tanzten in China* (*We Sang and Danced in China*) follows the Erich-Weinert Ensemble of the People's Army as it tours the PRC (Figure 5.4).



Figure 5.4. *We Sang and Danced in China* screenshot: © DEFA-Stiftung/Peter Barthel, Peter Sbrzesny

These East German army performers relish the apparently genuine, spontaneous, and hearty receptions from the Chinese everywhere, as the imagery and voice-over attest to: “It was like this; wherever we went, sincere and cordial friendship welcomed us.” In an act of friendship, German performers even sing songs in Chinese. As in the other two Jentsch films, the praise of the narrative voice for China’s recent achievements has an ideological spin. Speaking of the bridge straddling the Yangtze River in Wuhan, the narrator strikes an anti-imperialist tone: “One cannot build any bridge that is 1,700 meters long across the Yangtze, so said the imperialists.

The People's China built it within 15 months." While visiting a war ship in southern China in the wake of the Second Taiwan Strait Crisis, which occurred in August 1958, the narrator remains wary of the threat from Taiwan: "Taiwan, the last refuge of Chiang Kai-shek, is still far away, but near enough that its airplanes can still disturb our celebration of friendship. China has had its experience. China is alert." As the film attests to the interstate "friendship," one of the "state-socialist buzzwords" that circulate endlessly in these films, there is no better way to end the documentary than a song about friendship⁴³:

Oh Communism, oh happiness;
No, no one is above us, who could separate us.
You don't need to speak Chinese;
They don't need to understand German.
When they see your hand, a worker's hand, this is what unites us.
Two Workers' and Peasants' States,
Brothers, on the path to socialism,
Armies of People,
Friendship, friendship we will achieve when we stand together.

The fact that all vows of friendship ended as soon as the political climate changed shows that a tension between ideology and realpolitik lay at the core of Cold War politics. The relationship between China and the GDR started to worsen in 1960 as the SED accepted the Soviet view on the People's Commune. However, on the eve of the Sino-Soviet Split Gerhard Jentsch made a third documentary—*Genosse Sziau erzählt (Comrade Xiao Narrates, 1960)*—for DEFA's studio

for popular scientific films that delineates the genealogy of communist China and explains the building of the New China. It is not surprising that the film would soon be politically obsolete.

In *Comrade Xiao Narrates*, Jentsch creates a first-person narrative to justify communism in China by recounting the country's history from the perspective of a coolie who once lived in semi-colonial China and had to work fourteen hours a day in exchange for a handful of rice. Commenting on rare historical footage, the German-speaking "coolie" familiarizes East German viewers with the recent history of China's humiliation and exploitation at the hands of the colonizers. Presented in flashback as the "coolie's" indelible and haunting memories, the documentary footage switches back and forth between the slaving coolies and the overbearing, hedonistic Westerners. The scenes of the coolies, tinted a sepia or greenish color, are accompanied with pentatonic percussion music created by xylophone, drums, cymbals, and a gong. The music underscores the speed and drudgery of the coolies' work. These scenes alternate with brightly lit ones of the Westerners, with rock 'n' roll and popular Western music from the early 1950s on the sound track. The montage sequence functions as the "coolie's" accusation of the imperialists who became "rich and fat" at the cost of "us" and "our children." The narrator brings up the dehumanizing sign—"Chinese and Dogs Not Permitted"—in Shanghai parks, but he triumphantly announces that "this sign has disappeared, just as those who erected it." He resorts to the familiar socialist humanist rhetoric when he states that in the PRC he can finally feel "I am a human being." The narrator then uses a generational metaphor to dramatize the country's progress, a "father" taking pride in "his son" who is a brigadier at the An'shan steel plant, a symbol of China's industrialization and modernization (Figure 5.5). The importance of steel for the socialist economy is prevalent in all these films about China.



Figure 5.5. *Comrade Xiao Narrates* screenshot: © DEFA-Stiftung/Peter Sbrzesny

By using the non-diegetic song “In China Rises Mao Zedong” as leitmotif, the film not only captures the objective truth of the personality cult of Mao in China, but itself also resembles a tribute to Mao as the savior of the Chinese, the sun that rises in the East. From the perspective of a lowly former coolie, history is personalized and experienced as lived subjective truth. The film presents China’s choice of socialism as hard-fought and morally superior and its alternative of a Nationalist rule as complicit with the imperialist powers: “Now you understand why the blood in China is so red. You cannot buy a people, only a man; that man’s name is Chiang Kai-shek.” The Chinese civil war from 1945 to 1949 and the resulting division of mainland China and Taiwan resonate strongly in these DEFA documentaries. Such national division, be it in

China or on the Korean peninsula, mirrors Germany's own split. DEFA's condemnation of the US-backed Kuomintang regime as thwarting China's desire for national unity implicitly also places the blame on West Germany and its imperialist patrons for Germany's division. Such rhetoric draws a too simplistic analogy along Cold War lines and disregards the historical differences that produced these national divisions.

The Films of the 1980s

During the time of the Sino-Soviet Split, no more documentaries about China came out of the DEFA studio. Moreover, when the Dutch documentarist Joris Ivens brought out a twelve-hour long documentary cycle about China, *Comment Yukong déplaça les montagnes (How Yukong Moved Mountains, 1976)*, which offers a close-up look at everyday life in China after the Cultural Revolution, the film was not screened in the GDR. All the reviews in the press archive at the Academy for Film and Television (HFF) "Konrad Wolf" in Potsdam-Babelsberg are by West German newspapers.⁴⁴ The political alienation from China kept Ivens's documentary saga out of East German cinemas.

Not until Erich Honecker's visit to China in 1986 did DEFA start making documentaries about China again. Produced during the GDR's final years, these films were mainly travel reportages commissioned by GDR state television.⁴⁵ They bear witness to a modern China that had experienced waves of radical campaigns but had refocused on economic development as the country's first priority. The majority of these films are of an ethnographical nature, admiring Chinese scenery, people, culture, and traditions, including martial arts, acrobatics, local operas, etc. A socialist worldview continues to underpin the commentary. At the Temple of Heaven, the

narrator in *Zwischen Großer Mauer und Perlfloss* (*Between the Great Wall and the Pearl River*, 1986) comments, “Only in socialist China has it become possible to feed all people—today a quarter of the world’s population. The 317 emperors of the thirty-five dynasties prayed for an abundant harvest once a year here in the Temple of Heaven, but the gods could never help.” In 1987, Uwe Belz made an eight-episode television series, *Strom abwärts nach Shanghai* (*Downstream to Shanghai*), tracing the Yangtze River from its origin in the highlands of Tibet to its estuary in Shanghai. Tibetans, in Belz’s depiction, appear as liberated from their past lives of serfdom and as enjoying a better standard of living thanks to state subsidies:

If the Tibet of former times, kept in bondage, hungry, and ignorant, now belongs to the past, then—we hear this everywhere—thanks to the Chinese government. So far they provided seven and a half billion yuan to develop the autonomous region. We heard very telling statistics: in the past five years the peasants’ income here has doubled. And most people here are peasants.

In Chongqing, *Downstream to Shanghai* visits the Memorial of Liberation and the prisons where revolutionaries were murdered. In the last episode, the way in which Shanghai’s Bund is depicted exemplifies continuation of the anti-colonial and anti-imperial language: “Bund: On the promenade we still see stone witnesses of British and American foreign rule to which China was subjected.”

The reports abstain from critical language regarding China and, with the exceptions of *Leben in China* (*Life in China*, 1989) and *China—Mein Traum, mein Leben: Eva Siao—Ein Porträt* (*China—My Dream, my Life: Eva Xiao—A Portrait*, 1990), even refrain from any

reference to past political campaigns, such as the catastrophic Cultural Revolution. In Nanjing, the films never mention the Nanjing massacre; the omission cannot have been an oversight, but rather must have had to do with the official treatment of the massacre by the pragmatic Chinese government, which often prioritized its vital trade with Japan over historical justice to the victims.⁴⁶ Such evasions reinforce the very distinct agenda of realpolitik of the DEFA films during this time period. The fact that the Chinese government often co-sponsored the film projects placed added pressure on the filmmakers to adhere to official policies.⁴⁷

Although the films from the 1980s conform to socialist politics, they have toned down the ideological language. They attest to further technological progress, and the market scenes repeatedly affirm improved living standards and China's success in its modernization after Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms. One wonders how East German viewers might have reacted to the abundance of consumer goods on Chinese markets. Facing severe domestic problems, the filmmakers seem to use China as a success story—of a different kind this time—that testifies to socialism's capability of creating economic prosperity. It is left unsaid that whereas China could choose a socialist path with its own characteristics, this had been impossible for the GDR due to its dependency on the Soviet Union. If in the 1950s China offered ideological confirmation for the GDR, China in the late 1980s provided an admirable example of tailoring Marxist theories to its own specific needs. In previous films, DEFA had downplayed the GDR's export of technology. A trade event, which *From Wismar to Shanghai* should have documented, became merely an opportunity to reiterate East German ideology. However, in the 1980s the trade between the GDR and China is mentioned whenever the chance arises. For instance, *Downstream to Shanghai* contains a lengthy episode about the city of Wuhan's purchase of refrigeration wagons (*Kühlwaggon*) from VEB Waggonbau Dessau in an exchange of know-

how. The filmmakers appear to take pride in the GDR's role in exporting high-tech to China and thus contributing to its modernization.

Conclusion

By looking at DEFA's Cold War documentaries on China, this essay has examined how ideology and realpolitik played out in the bilateral relationship between the GDR and China. At the height of the Cold War, ideology was a decisive factor in determining policy and the two were inseparable. However, East Germany's revolutionary aspirations gradually took a back seat to realpolitik. The priority of "economics over politics," which manifested itself during the European *détente* and in the *New International Economic Order* (NIEO) movement, gradually came to dominate the country's international relations.⁴⁸ Filmmakers with an uncompromising socialist *Weltanschauung* faced the challenge of being perceived as too ideologically rigid, while also having to keep up with the swerves and reversals in the party line, as reflected in the changing policies regarding the People's Commune and China in general. Given the limitations to which these politically driven documentaries were subjected, it is easy to label them propaganda, which they undoubtedly are to a great extent. Yet, as propagandistic as they may be, they should be placed in the historical context of the post-fascist era where socialism appeared as a viable alternative to capitalism with all its attendant ills of colonialism and imperialism.

Moreover, the merits of the films—cultural and historical—exceed that of mere propaganda. They attest to an episode of unusual openness to the world that overcame the hierarchical divide between the Second and the Third World, between East and West. Ideological bonding with China also enabled East Germans to overcome their feelings of superiority as white

Europeans, brave cultural differences, and withstand, quite successfully, the usual orientalist jargon. Ideological affinity enabled East Germans to appreciate China, which the majority of them had no other opportunity to see than on film. In the post-Cold War context in which we live today, the binary opposition between socialism and capitalism, which these films construct, might appear obsolete to many. As products of the time (*Zeitdokumente*), they are culturally interesting and historically valuable. Beyond that, their stance against colonialism, imperialism, sexism, and other forms of exploitation and oppression still resonates in the early twenty-first century, and the idealism of the filmmakers is to be understood in their own historical context.

Notes

¹ I would like to thank the following archives for allowing me to watch the films and for supplying important materials about them: Bundesarchiv-Filmarchiv in Berlin, Deutsches Rundfunkarchiv in Potsdam-Babelsberg, Pressedokumentation at Die Hochschule für Film und Fernsehen (HFF) “Konrad Wolf” in Potsdam-Babelsberg, Deutsche Kinemathek—Museum für Film und Fernsehen in Berlin, and the DEFA-Stiftung. I want to thank DEFA-Spektrum in Berlin for providing stills of the films and for giving me permission to use them. I am also indebted to the DEFA Film Library at the University of Massachusetts Amherst for hosting the 2011 DEFA Summer Film Institute with a thematic focus on “Cold War/Hot Media: DEFA and the Third World” that provided me with an expertly compiled reader and a week of inspiring discussions. I thank Benjamin Robinson, Evan Torner, and Skyler Arndt-Briggs for reading my essay and offering insightful suggestions for revision.

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- ² Young-Sun Hong, “The Benefits of Health Must Spread Among All: International Solidarity, Health, and Race in the East German Encounter with the Third World,” In *Socialist Modern*, ed. Katherine Pence and Paul Betts (Ann Arbor, 2008), 183.
- ³ Thomas Heimann, “Von Stahl und Menschen: 1953 bis 1960,” *Schwarzweiß und Farbe: DEFA Dokumentarfilme, 1946–92* (Berlin, 1996), 72.
- ⁴ William Glenn Gray, *Germany’s Cold War: The Global Campaign to Isolate East Germany, 1949–1969* (Chapel Hill & London, 2003). Thomas Barnett, *Romanian and East German Policies in the Third World: Comparing the Strategies of Ceausescu and Honecker* (Westport, CT, 1992).
- ⁵ Barnett, *Romanian and East German Policies*, 95.
- ⁶ Barnett, *Romanian and East German Policies*, 105.
- ⁷ Barnett, *Romanian and East German Policies*, 152.
- ⁸ Werner Meißner, ed. *Die DDR und China 1949 bis 1990: Politik – Wirtschaft – Kultur: Eine Quellensammlung*. Bearbeitet von Anja Feege (Berlin, 1995), 29–31 and 74–81.
- ⁹ Meißner, *Die DDR und China*, 29 and 71; Harald Möller, “Das Beispiel China: DDR und VRCH 1949–1964,” *DDR und Dritte Welt: die Beziehungen der DDR mit Entwicklungsländern, ein neues theoretisches Konzept, dargestellt anhand der Beispiele China und Äthiopien sowie Irak/Iran* (Berlin, 2003), 106ff.
- ¹⁰ Meißner, *Die DDR und China*, 83–91; Möller, “Das Beispiel China,” 112–4.
- ¹¹ Meißner, *Die DDR und China*, 33.
- ¹² Lorenz M. Lüthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World* (Princeton, 2008).
- ¹³ Gareth M. Winrow, *The Foreign Policy of the GDR in Africa* (Cambridge, 1990), 19.
- ¹⁴ Meißner, *Die DDR und China*, 15–16; Möller, “Das Beispiel China,” 134–141.

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- ¹⁵ Meißner, *Die DDR und China*, 17.
- ¹⁶ Jordan/Schenk, eds., *Schwarzweiß und Farbe*, 232.
- ¹⁷ Meißner, *Die DDR und China*, 20.
- ¹⁸ Charles Musser, "Utopian Visions in Cold War Documentary: Joris Ivens, Paul Robeson and *Song of the Rivers* (1954)," *CiNéMAS* 12, no. 3 (2002): 109–153.
- ¹⁹ Gray, *Germany's Cold War*, 85.
- ²⁰ Heimann, "Von Stahl und Menschen," 71. See also Dennis Hanlon, "Die Windrose," *DEFA Film Library Newsletter* (Jan 2012).
- ²¹ Möller, "Das Beispiel China," 104.
- ²² "exotische Kulissen," see Heimann, "Von Stahl und Menschen," 72.
- ²³ Bill Nichols, *Ideology and the Image: Social Representation in the Cinema and Other Media* (Bloomington, 1981), 7.
- ²⁴ All translations are by the author.
- ²⁵ Barnett, *Romanian and East German Policies*, 149.
- ²⁶ Heimann, "Von Stahl und Menschen," 58.
- ²⁷ Barnett, *Romanian and East German Policies*, 102.
- ²⁸ See Joseph W. Esherick, *The Origins of the Boxer Uprising* (Berkeley, 1987) and Paul A. Cohen, *History in Three Keys: The Boxers as Event, Experience, and Myth* (New York, 1997), especially Part 3.
- ²⁹ Heimann, "Von Stahl und Menschen," 73.
- ³⁰ Gray, *Germany's Cold War*, 5.
- ³¹ Hanlon, "Die Windrose."
- ³² Nichols, *Ideology and the Image*, 238,

³³ Joris Ivens, “Repeated and Organized Scenes in Documentary Film (1953),” *Joris Ivens and the Documentary Context*, ed. Kees Bakker (Amsterdam, 1999), 261–272.

³⁴ “Da steht man wahrhaftig mit dem Schmelztiigel in der Hand mitten im Schmelztiigel der Zeit.”

³⁵ Ernst Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times [Erbschaft dieser Zeit]*, trans. Neville and Stephen Plaice (Berkeley, 1991).

³⁶ Gray, *Germany’s Cold War*, 116.

³⁷ Barnett, *Romanian and East German Policies*, 105.

³⁸ Hong, “The Benefits of Health,” 186–7.

³⁹ Heimann, “Von Stahl und Menschen,” 59.

⁴⁰ Meißner, *Die DDR und China*, 33.

⁴¹ “politisch deplaciert,” see Heimann, “Von Stahl und Menschen,” 50.

⁴² Barnett, *Romanian and East German Policies*, 100.

⁴³ Hong, “The Benefits of Health,” 194.

⁴⁴ For examples: “Yü Gong versetzt Berge: Der Filmzyklus über China von Joris Ivens and Marceline Loridan,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 5 June 1977; “Sich China nähern: Ein Filmzyklus von Joris Ivens und Marceline Loridan,” *Der Tagesspiegel—Berlin*, 4 June 1977; “Eine Reise nach China: Das Außerordentliche an dem Yukong-Film von Joris Ivens und Marceline Loridan,” *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 7 September 1976; “Yü Gung versetzt Berge: Eine Dokumentarfilmreihe über den Alltag in der Volksrepublik China,” *Stuttgarter Zeitung*, 22 September 1976.

⁴⁵ *Zwischen Großer Mauer und Perlfloss: Begegnungen in der Volksrepublik China*, TV Film, Redakteur: Antje Geyer (20 October 1986); *Strom abwärts nach Shanghai*, dir. Uwe Belz (1987);

Hallo, wie gehts? Wang Ling in Peking, dir. Uwe Belz (1988); *Ni hao – heißt Guten Tag*, dir. Uwe Belz (1989); *Kaiserkanal China*, dir. Uwe Belz (1989); *Leben in China*, Gestaltung: Horst Mempel (1989); *China - Mein Traum, mein Leben: Eva Siao – Ein Porträt* (1990).

⁴⁶ Takashi Yoshida, “A Battle over History: The Nanjing Massacre in Japan,” In *The Nanjing Massacre in History and Historiography*, ed. Joshua A. Fogel (Berkeley, 2000), 70–132. Also see my article, “Revisiting the Wound of a Nation: The ‘Good Nazi’ John Rabe and the Nanking Massacre,” *Seminar: A Journal of Germanic Studies* 47.5 (November 2011): 661–680.

⁴⁷ Quite a few films, including *China—Land zwischen gestern und morgen*, mention in the credits the generous support from the Ministry of Culture of the PRC and Chinese filmmakers: “Dieser Film wurde mit großzügiger Unterstützung des Ministeriums für Kultur und der Filmschaffenden der Chinesischen Volksrepublik hergestellt.”

⁴⁸ Barnett, *Romanian and East German Policies*, 105.