Labors of Love: Towards a New Anthropology of Value in Two Contemporary Chinese Films

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Abstract:

Professor Rey Chow has used Martin Heidegger's essay "Age of the World Picture" as a theoretical framing for discussing contemporary China and Chinese cinema, particularly as a means of informing the way Chinese measure their own worth in relation to Western spectatorship. In this essay, I show how Heidegger's existentialism facilitates a specific meta-narrative of transcendent values, a "myth of world picture" which depends on associating the exotic with the valuable. Using René Girard as a means of redefining my position, I show how these ambiguous discussions on value can be made intelligible by understanding narratives of value through a fundamentally anthropological, or humanistic, lens. The relation between economic and transcendent value is equivocated and challenged in the works of Zhang Yimou and Jia Zhangke. These films suggest a new kind of mythic enchantment, in which the means of transcendent value production does not emphasize escaping the world picture but rather reclaiming the value of human relationships as having intrinsic worth.

Jia Zhangke's 2007 documentary film *Useless* (*Wu-Yong*)[1] features China's renowned fashion designer Ma Ke, founder of the Chinese high-end clothing brand, *Exception de Mixmind* (*Li Wai*).[2] At the beginning of the film, Ma Ke provides a brief narrative to describe the inspiration for her brand. The idea arose from her desire to start a clothing line that was "uniquely Chinese." Starting in 1996, the *Exception* brand has gone on to enjoy major retail success in Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Beijing. But despite the success of *Exception*, Ma Ke felt there was something still missing. Although she had created a "unique Chinese brand" Ma Ke lamented the impersonality and lifelessness of industrialized clothing production. She expresses in her interview:

> Objects made by hands convey emotions. What I mean is that making things by hand is a long and laborious process. So, handmade objects contain emotional elements that are quite different from mass-produced commodities. According to a line in a traditional Chinese poem: "the mother stitches [to make clothes] for her travelling son." That's the kind of emotion I am talking about.[3]

In the spirit of this poem, Ma Ke embarks on a new non-commercial art project which she calls *Useless*. Her title strikes a certain ironic posture, as her intent is to highlight that the process of making (the product) is itself an intrinsic component of the product's value, a process which, from the perspective of industry, is "useless." Ma Ke hand-stitches garments which she then buries in the dirt, letting nature run its course upon it. As Ma Ke puts it, this is to allow "the whole process of living [to infuse] the object." Ma Ke continues,

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[1] 無用
[2] 例外
[3] *Useless*, 23:56 to 24:39. The Tang dynasty poem quoted is: "慈母手中线, 游子身上衣." Original Chinese text taken from Calvin Hui, "Dirty fashion," p. 256.

> It's never there in industrialized production. It's easy to see why. With industrialized production, there is no link between the maker and the user. You don't know who made your clothes. In a materialistic society, handmade objects will obviously never be popular. They go against the principles of business. Handmade objects last longer. People use them continuously. Precisely because they take longer to make, because the maker invests so much in them, even when such things get broken, they are unlikely to be thrown away. […] But, if we buy a disposable cup, we will use it once and throw it away. There will be no stories to tell about it. It's essentially lifeless.[4]

Ma Ke's dilemma is not an uncommon one for an educated generation who are the beneficiaries of a developed country. She is wrestling with the problem of inflation that inevitably attends any kind of industrialized production. But the word "inflation" here is misleading, as it suggests a metric of value measured exclusively in the economic terms of supply and demand. But Ma Ke is not thinking of "value" in economic terms at all. She is, quite simply, thinking as a poet, as her quotation from a Tang dynasty poem reveals. Indeed, the idea behind Ma Ke's "*Wu-Yong"* could be considered a kind of neo-Daoist embodiment of *wu-wei*: where the man-made object is fashioned by non-action in co-creation with nature.[5] Ma Ke is attempting to go straight to the heart of what makes an object valuable—which is a question of anthropology, sociology, philosophy, and even religion—before it is a question of economics.

Hannah Arendt and the Difference between Work and Labor

Whether Ma Ke is aware of it or not, she is implicitly rejecting the Marxist elevation of the laborer, which played a major role in shaping the industrialized China she now criticizes. Her

[4] *Useless*, 24:39 to 24:56.
[5] 無為

thinking is in fact more akin to Hannah Arendt, who argued in *The Human Condition* that there was a distinction between work and labor.[6] Arendt drew the fault line between work and labor as the difference between productive and unproductive labor respectively. Labor was defined as all human activity dedicated to the maintenance of human life. The products of labor are "unproductive" because they are produced for consumption and consequently contribute nothing to the "human artifice": i.e. the world of man-made things. Labor is unending, necessary, and always accompanied with a sense of futility. Work, on the other hand, has a clearly defined beginning and end, and the result is always the production of some tool or object that contributes to what Arendt calls the "human artifice." Both a hammer and a painting are the products of work, but the latter serves us as a better example for emphasizing the defining feature of *work* which Arendt saw as particularly important: as the product of the human mind. The painting has the greatest lasting durability because, unlike the hammer, it is never used for labor. Art is *useless* (*wu-yong*) and therefore *valuable* to Ma Ke in the deeper, more poetic sense, specifically because it is never *used up*.

Ma Ke would also likely agree with Arendt's assertion that humankind has historically perceived work as superior to labor (although she may not notice that this attitude was a distinctly upper-class one). The modern lack of distinction between work and labor, for Arendt, results in a world where almost all activities previously considered work must now be presented (and regarded as) labor. In a postindustrial world, we treat "all use objects as though they were consumer goods, so that a chair or a table is now consumed as rapidly as a dress and a dress used up almost as quickly as food."[7] Because we have substituted all work for labor, modernity

[6] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition,* Ch. III: "Labor," p. 79-135, and Ch. IV: "Work," p. 136-174.
[7] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition,* p. 124.

encounters the novelty of the "mass produced" product and the phenomenon of "planned obsolescence." China, which earned the badge of modernity by reinventing itself as the manufacturing state of the world, has borne the fruits of the European industrial revolution in even greater abundance than Europe. It was precisely the success of China's industrialization which gave the phrase "Made in China" a connotation for objects that are cheap and worthless, a connotation which Ma Ke wants to redefine. She would prefer the word "China" to be dissociated from the phrase "Made in China" and instead be reassociated with the phrase "fine china": i.e. signifying an object that is superlatively valuable and precious.

Further extending the dialogue between Ma Ke and Arendt, Ma Ke's basic criticism of labor could be aligned with Arendt's criticism of Marx. Arendt maintained that Marx made a distinction between man as *animal laborans* (laboring animal) and *animal rationale* (rational animal) the former setting him apart from the rest of the animal kingdom.[8] If in the Marxist utopia the proletariat are to shake off the shackles of all labor, they would, by Marx's logic, cease to possess the defining characteristic of their humanity (*animal laborans*) and therefore cease to be human. Although one could argue that elevation of labor over work which contributed to the success story that is China today, it has, by the same token, also contributed to the negative stereotype of Chinese workers as machines. Can China be only a contributor to labor but never to work?

René Girard, Mimetic Desire and "The Quality of Oneness"

[8] Arendt's criticism of Marx can only be made understandable through her own particular definitions of the terms "work," and "labor." Arendt has been since criticized more misrepresenting Marx's view. Here, I confine my theoretical analysis to Arendt's work/labor distinction, rather than attempting to integrate it with a true Marxist framework. See Christoph Schuringa, "Animal Laborans: Arendt and Weil on Marx," p. 146.

But if we define the problem of value in China today solely in Marxist or post-Marxist terms, it only muddles the discourse on value whose real roots, to borrow Isak Dinesen's phrase, "lies deeper in the domain of human hearts."[9] So, what actually *does* make an object valuable? René Girard combined the anthropological with the religious in his theory of "mimetic desire": positing that we desire things because other people desire them. Girard's theory stands in contrast with the common assumption that human conflict arises from limited resources. Rather, Girard asserts that it is the "mimetic contagion" of the crowd imitating the desires of their neighbor for a single object, regardless of the object's inherent worth. Although Girard views mimetic contagion as the crowd acting upon an illusion, he argues that the illusion originates from a fundamentally religious impulse. In fact, says Girard, *everything* "is false, theatrical, and artificial in desire except for the immense and unacknowledged hunger for the sacred."[10] The value of an object, in these terms, requires two conditions: first, it must be perceived as a *rare* object, and secondly, it must be *perceived*. Premodern China had its own way of managing this perception, while modern China must rely on the much more complex and pluralistic mimetic games of propaganda and social control. [11] But however one defines the fundamental epistemic shift from "premodern" to "modern," it does not change the fact that the basic human mechanisms and criteria with which we assign value to the object remains the same.

Towards an "Anthropology of Value"

The aim of this essay is to provide a fundamentally anthropological definition of value as one that ought to precede and shape our understanding of any attempted economic definition,

[9] Isak Dinesen, *Babette's Feast*, 1958.
[10] René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel,* p. 79.
[11] Making the inner quarters of the imperial powers forbidden and castrating all of the male subjects except the emperor are examples of safeguarding the emperor from the mimetic contagion, as they ensure that the rare object (the emperor) is both *rare* and collectively *perceived* as such.

specifically in relation to China. "Anthropological" can be understood here as referring to the "humanistic," but I will prefer the former term because I begin from an *a posteriori* observation of human behavior, rather than an *a priori* assumption of human nature. Both Jia Zhangke as a filmmaker and Ma Ke as a fashion designer are asking questions that involve the search for what must be some kind of "sacred" or "transcendent" value even if no specifically religious worldview is directly invoked. Framing my analysis through Girard and Arendt, I will further expand this idea through the lens of Martin Heidegger's philosophical concept of "world picture" and Edward Said's critique of Orientalism before concluding with a comparison and contrast of the themes in Jia Zhangke's documentary *Useless* with Zhang Yimou's 1999 comedy-drama *Not One Less.* Both films exhibit a kind of passion for objects, and yet the means by which the characters earnestly celebrate and ascribe value to the object is acquired only by the dramatic reassertion and triumph of a human relationship.

My goal is to more clearly define an anthropology of value that is concerned primarily with the object that acquires *teleological, superlative value*, which becomes the gold standard or "original" object by which all copies are weighted against. The narrative of this "rare object" will often follow the pattern of three principles: (1) First, an object acquires preciousness if it is perceived as having what I call the "quality of oneness"—that is, if the object is understood as being not just singular, but *cosmically* singular. "Cosmic singularity" is defined here as possessing total uniqueness within a given *cosmos*. Economies are a kind of *cosmos,* but there are many other *cosmos* (i.e., familial, cultural, spiritual, or aesthetic cosmologies) in which the process of value production follow the same pattern. The cosmic singularity is the ultimate mode of production—a kind of mythical Fountain of Youth from which an inexhaustible wellspring of meanings can be derived, reproduced, and distributed. The necessity of a cosmic singularity

leads us to the second quality: (2) the rare object needs to be situated in appropriate liminal space between the inside and outside the *cosmos*. An object too close to or too far from the cosmic center would disenchant the object of its visible otherness. Foreign objects sometimes acquire this status and sometimes not; it all depends on where the community draws the boundaries of its *cosmos*. (3) the rare object has no value unless the community is in unanimous agreement regarding its rarity. In other words, the object must be collectively viewed and consumed as having the quality of "oneness."

Heidegger and China as "World Picture"

For 21st century China, the politics of value are arguably more difficult to define than for the premodern, if only because it is more difficult to "see the forest from the trees." Rey Chow employs Heidegger's theory of "the world as picture" as a way of understanding how China has reconfigured and reasserted itself to be recognized as valuable in the new landscapes of modernity. The theory itself deserves some attention since it helps move us further along toward an "anthropology of value."

Heidegger's theory of "world picture" was closely linked to his general critique of technology, in which he argued that the technological "*gestelle*" (enframing) of modernity encloses modern man as one who sees the world "as picture" that is, within a machinated epistemological framework. Heideggerian enframing replaces *poiesis* (creation) as a mode of production with *techne* (craft).[12] It is helpful in elucidating Heidegger's argument to point out that the German *gestelle* can also mean "skeleton," thus carrying with it a certain elegiac or nostalgic flavor of an object emptied of its lifeblood and *animus*. In the world picture, wind and

[12] Brendan O'Donoghue, "A Poetics of Homecoming," p. 226.

rivers are an "energy" source only insofar as they can be processed and translated through the enframing of *techne*—but they are not, in any ontological sense, "energetic" or animated entities. The technological mode of production, unlike the poetic, endows the object with purpose but not with meaning. In Heidegger's words, "Enframing [*gestelle*] in a way characteristic of a destining, blocks *poiesis.*"[13]

Closely related to the blocking of *poiesis,* Heidegger calls attention to "the annihilation of distance"[14] as yet another onslaught to the premodern edifices of value of which the age of world picture is the guilty culprit. The miracles of modern technology serve to make all places immediately adjacent, so that "foreignness" can no longer be an avenue for evoking the numinous. The costly venture of traversing territory is reduced to nothing more than a quixotic exercise, as nothing in the world picture can be truly foreign. Edward Said's critique of Orientalism exposes the artificiality of "foreignness"-as-value in contemporary academia, irrevocably ripping away Western rose-tinted glasses of the Orient. However, what is missing from post-Said critiques of Orientalism is a more sympathetic and humanistic inquiry into why people and cultures historically romanticize the Other at all. Wang Mingming critiques Said for this oversight in *The West as the Other*, writing, "While Said is critical of the expansive power of modern Western knowledge, his work paradoxically functions as if a spirit possesses us and presses us to treat the West as the only imaginative and perceptive subject."[15] A more interesting question is why the scandal of orientalism is so much more acutely felt in modern sensibility. To answer this question, we need first to understand the phenomenon of *poesis* as a mode of production—that is, the human tendency to value objects for their subjective relation to the

[13] Brendan O'Donoghue, "A Poetics of Homecoming," p. 226.
[14] Martin Heidegger, "The Age of World Picture," p.136.
[15] Wang Mingming, p. 9.

bearer, in which distance and process are the fundamental qualities sought after, rather than the mere economics of supply and demand.[16]

Can poesis *be a mode of production?*

How did modernity change its attitude toward the Other? For Heidegger, technology and machinery were the chief wizards of modern sorcery, the agents which, in his view, were powerful enough to fundamentally alter our "being-in-the-world." But if the idea of the "world picture" is to be taken at face value, and we accept his assertion that distance and *poiesis* have been totally annihilated by the world picture, we are in a rather dire predicament of which neither Heidegger nor Said offer many viable solutions. Since Said has disenchanted the Orient, how can we ever be enchanted again? There is no way transcendent value, ontologically and spiritually speaking, can reassert itself in the age of world picture. But Heidegger's very insistence that the world is indeed picture infuses his theory with a kind of quality which, when challenged, betrays a suspicious inflexibility. In fact, Heidegger's existentialist phenomenology bears much similarity in its mythological shape to the German Romanticists who came before him, particularly Max Weber's notion of "disenchantment." Heidegger's "age of world picture" has veracity only insofar as it helped shape the myth of modernity. While it may prove difficult to trace Heidegger's Romanticist roots, as he was known for disguising the origins of his own influence, his lack of sources further exposes the fact that his work was a kind of mythopoeia masquerading as philosophy.[17]

[16] Aristotle argued in his *Poetics* the "unfamiliar words" which possessed aesthetic value, among which he listed "foreign words" (*xenikoi logoi*). *Poetics*, p. 56.
[17] Dilip Naik, *The Poetics of History*, xvi.

Josephson-Storm argues in *The Myth of Disenchantment* that the modernist notion that we are disenchanted with is itself a form of enchantment—a way of creating a narrative that we are unique, and therefore valuable.[18] It is, in other words, a way of creating a cosmic singularity out of modernity. Those who mourn the "loss of the gods" and of enchantment suffer from yet another illusion of modernity of which a closer analysis might cure. This idea of re-enchantment exists also in the films of Jia Zhangke and Zhang Yimou. In particular, the films discussed here find subtle ways to reassert value in the age of world picture that work towards the production of a different kind of myth.

The Problem with Ma Ke's Anthropology of Value

The purpose of the *Wu-Yong* exhibit*,* for Ma Ke, is to reclaim value of the China-made product. Unlike the hand-made product, the process of the mass-produced product inevitably initiates an entropic depreciation of value, which ultimately gives the phrase "Made-in-China" its association with cheapness. Although China's association with "cheapness" has far more to do with the demands of Western buyer's unwillingness to pay for quality than it does with the Chinese ability to produce it, Chinese citizens have internalized this Western perception of themselves. *Exception,* as it turns out, was not exceptional enough. Infinite disposability, planned obsolescence, the absence of memories, heritage, or stories, and the impersonal denial of the relationship between maker and user are all diseases of the mass-produced product, which Ma Ke's *Wu-Yong* is meant to be the cure. Perhaps Ma Ke imagines that this time, she really will succeed in manufacturing a truly "rare object."

[18] Jason Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment,* p.64.

But there is a sly suggestion in the film, as Calvin Hui observes, that Jia Zhangke is actually exposing and critiquing the inherent artificiality (i.e. mimetic artificiality) of Ma Ke's project. None of the sentiments expressed about the relational value of the object are actually realized in the exhibition itself.[19] In the documentary, Jia shows the group of French fashion models preparing backstage for the Paris Fashion Week exhibit. The women are applying fake dirt-makeup to their faces while casually chatting to each other in French. The hidden critique lies in what the models are *not* talking about. They have merely been recruited to perform for a fashion gig. Naturally, they are more interested in "talking shop" about the mechanics of their own profession than embodying the relational value of the handmade object.

Unlike the traditional catwalk of the fashion industry, Ma Ke has her fashion models stand motionless on illuminated pedestals arranged on the gymnasium floor. The audience is later invited to walk out on the floor and examine the models up close, interacting with them as if they were displays in a museum. At the end of the exhibit, it is Ma Ke who is applauded, not the fashion models. These are Ma Ke's creations—the bodies on which her clothes are draped are just that: bodies. At no point does Jia Zhangke show Ma Ke interacting with the models, or the models expressing any opinion, positive or negative, about Ma Ke. Watching the exhibit, the viewer is compelled to ask: Where is the relation between maker and user that Ma Ke has supposedly restored? At what point is the emotion of "the mother stitching for her travelling son" invoked at any point in the show?

In reality, what Ma Ke's collection is presenting is not a relational object but the *idea* of a relational object, valued by her audience only insofar as it evokes a sentimental contemplation of

[19] Hui, p. 260.

the relational object. The relational distance between the viewer in the model is equivalent to the customer and the model at an *Exception* superstore, and the relational distance between maker (Ma Ke) and wearer is equivalent to the distance between the factory worker and consumer. It seems that no matter what new methods Ma Ke employs, she has not quite succeeded in closing the gap between maker and user. The collection proves to be truly "useless" in a way quite different from what Ma Ke originally intended, as the whole process by which she imbues her clothing with exceptionality proves ultimately to be a vain endeavor. The consumer's *interaction* with the object remains just as impersonal as before.

The latter half of the documentary features Ma Ke's excursion to the countryside. As they drive through rural mountain roads, Ma Ke further elaborates on her philosophical views on the simpler rural lifestyle:

> "This is exactly what I opted for. Places very remote from cities. Places that are hard to get to, including mountain areas and plateaus. What I'm trying to get at is that people who live in such places have lives that are very different, maybe even *utterly* different. When you go to such places and see how the people live, it seems to me a bit like recovering a lost memory. You gradually start to remember things you once felt." [Italics mine][20]

Ma Ke's sentiment here might be easily criticized for invoking the same "Orientalist melancholia" very similar to the sentiment of 19th century German Romanticists.[21] But such behavior is precisely what we should expect of an individual operating within the Heideggerian myth of world picture. In the age of disenchantment, how else can transcendent values be

[20] *Useless,* 48:29 to 49:05.
[21] Rey Chow, "Leading Questions," p.192.

generated and accessed? Ma Ke says that she seeks places that are "hard to get to" where she can see the people whose lives, she hopes, are *utterly* different from hers. But why? To "feel what she once felt." What she really wants, of course, is to approach *value* and all the qualities attendant upon value—that is, distance, otherness, and singularity—and to somehow consummate herself with it.

In the second half of the film, Jia Zhangke interviews a working-class couple on the subject of clothing. The husband, who was previously a tailor, has lost his job to big city factories and now works as a coal miner. The subject of the interview concerns a pink suit that the husband has bought for his wife. As Calvin Hui argues, the juxtaposition of the two interviews effectively undermines Ma Ke's original message. In spite of Ma Ke's notion that only the handmade object has value, the working-class husband goes out of his way to buy a "mass-produced" product for his wife. The couple does not even take advantage of the fact that the husband could have handmade the suit himself, a gesture which, according to Ma Ke, ought to have been more "authentic."[22]

Despite the fact that Ma Ke's philosophy appears to be at odds with the working-class couple, the sentiments of both parties are entirely consistent with the "anthropological" understanding of value. In both cases, the individual attempts to create a value by retrieving an object outside their own *cosmos,* thus imbuing it with relational and poetic significance. Both Ma Ke and the working-class couple are driven by the aesthetic value of things which are distant and foreign from their own perspective. Although one could argue that Ma Ke's project failed to create authentic value, she was following the basic social pattern by which value is generated in

[22] Calvin Hui, "Dirty Fashion," p.261.

a given *cosmos*. In fact, Ma Ke's constant migration to new projects and adventures, culminating in her visit to the countryside and virtually disappearing from the documentary altogether, indirectly reveals the deeper truth about Ma Ke's perennial (and perhaps fruitless and unsatisfying) search for value. Ma Ke's art project, *Useless,* is the equivalent of an urban folk religion where sacredness and sacred spaces can be summoned through the performance of certain rituals. The only difference between Ma Ke and the working-class couple is that Ma Ke is not making clothes *for* anyone. The relational aspect of clothing is all it would have taken to evoke the emotion of "the mother stitching for her traveling son," an emotion which the working-class husband achieves effortlessly for no other reason than because he bought a dress for his wife. The problems of value production which *Useless* demonstrate an important question: is there any way to create transcendent value and enchantment except by the fabrication of illusion?

The Paradigm Shift of Not One Less: Towards a New Mode of Value Production

Zhang Yimou's 1999 film *Not One Less* has not attracted a substantial amount of critical attention. His more ambitious films such as *To Live* or *Raise the Red Lantern* may seem to have more to offer in terms of discussing gender, race, class, nationality, and politics. However, too much attention on these more famous films runs the risk of underappreciating the filmmaker's talent for minimalism, which is showcased especially well *Not One Less*. The film's simple cinematography and musical scoring serve as a kind of argument to the viewer. Zhang Yimou unfolds his story with painstaking patience and single-minded focus on his heroine. What begins as an invitation to attend and care for his mundane and parochial subject matter (education in impoverished rural China) crescendos throughout the film to the force of a moral injunction.

The story follows Wei Minzhi, a thirteen-year-old schoolgirl in northern rural China, who has been recruited by the mayor of the neighboring village to work as a temporary substitute teacher. The local teacher, Gao Laoshi, has to leave town to care for his sick mother, and is unwilling to accept a thirteen-year-old as a substitute. However, since she is the only person available, the mayor eventually convinces him to accept her. There were originally forty students in the school, but ten have already left to find work in the city. In a scene that is symbolically important for the foreshadowing later events, Gao Laoshi carefully lays out the chalk for Wei Minzhi to use before leaving: twenty-six pieces of chalk for twenty-six days of teaching. Wei is left in the charge of twenty-eight schoolchildren for one month. She will be paid fifty yuan for her labor, and Gao Laoshi promises an additional ten if Wei can keep all twenty-eight students from leaving: "*Yi ge dou buneng shao*" he instructs—that is, "not even one can be allowed to be missing."[23]

Both *counting* and *children* are major themes in the film. It is by contemplating the relationship between these two themes that Zhang Yimou challenges and redefines the purely economic and capitalist definitions of value. At first, Wei Minzhi shows all the qualities of a capitalist. She responds to the teacher's directive by running the class like a Chinese factory boss. She writes a lesson on the blackboard, demands the students to copy it, and then immediately leaves the classroom, assuming that her only purpose is to prevent them from escaping. The only time she engages in any kind of classroom management is when she conducts roll call in the morning. Given her behavior in the first act, the viewer might be tempted to suspect that Wei Minzhi's motivations are nothing other than a mercenary aim to maximize her profits. When one of her students encounters an opportunity to go to a city sports school, Wei's

[23] 一个都不能少, also the original title of the film.

resistance comes across as impractical and backward. Surely, she ought to see that this opportunity is an exceptional circumstance that would benefit the student: what does she have to lose other than the promise of an additional ten yuan if she loses zero students?

But Wei's character will prove to be deeper than it appears. When one of her most impoverished students, Zhang Huike, leaves the village to find work in Beijing to help support his mother, we see just how seriously Wei Minzhi takes Gao Laoshi's instructions. She first begins by simply demanding the students to pay for her bus fare. When they come up short, Wei takes the class out on a "field trip" to transport bricks in a local brickyard. When this fails to earn enough money, she tries to stowaway on the bus, and after failing at this, she walks the entire long distance to the city. Her arrival in the city comprises the second act of the film, in which Wei stubbornly undertakes the needle-in-haystack task of locating Zhang Huike in an almost infinitely large city. It is only after catching the attention of a benevolent TV station manager, who features her on the show "Today in China" do her efforts finally pay off.

Rey Chow has shown how *Not One Less* can be understood as a migratory journey from a "political economy of labor to a political economy of vision."[24] As Wei goes from transporting bricks to writing and tacking up posters to eventually appearing on "Today in China" in which she "effortlessly completes her mission" Chow argues that that the film inadvertently shows how the mediatized image has become the new mode of production in contemporary China. The contrast, for Chow, lies in the tension between the outdated system of a one-on-one method of accounting and a new mode of production. While I agree *Not One Less* can be discussed as a film about migration to a new mode of value production, the shift from a labor to a vision economy is

[24] Rey Chow, *Sentimental Fabulations,* p. 147.

not the film's fundamental intradiegetic message. The film could be read instead as a migration from the quantitative to the qualitative, from the quantity of "one" to the quality of "one". When Wei's appears on "Today in China", her labor finally becomes "work" in Arendt's sense of the word. *Not One Less* begins by presenting itself as a movie that is about nothing but numbers and ends in a place where nothing is a number, and everything is one.

Wei Minzhi's Moral Education: Valuing One as One

If the power of the mediatized image is the primary lesson of *Not One Less*, it is only a lesson to the viewer. Wei certainly undergoes a character arc throughout the film, but her arc consists less in an education in the power of particular technological modalities than in a moral education in learning to value the singularity of the one singular individual as a supremely precious object. The film's paradigm shift is not activated by the external imposition of the mediatized image replacing and/or displacing an older, outdated method of value production. Rather, the paradigm shift is facilitated from within as the fruition of Wei Minzhi's moral education—the moment in which she realizes that her student should not only be valued as a numerical asset in a system, but rather because of his own inherent value of oneness. In this moment, the gap between teacher and student (maker and user, labor and work) is effectively closed.

Zhang Huike and Wei Minzhi have had a tumultuous relationship from the onset. Zhang Huike, who notices that Wei's weak spot is her anxiety in losing students, repeatedly rebels by trying to run away. In one scene, Zhang Huike causes a disruption in the class by claiming that another classmate has been slandering Wei in her diary. Wei demands that Zhang Huike read the diary aloud. But what the diary reveals is something quite different from what Wei expects:

"I feel very sad. Two days ago, Zhang Huike was making trouble and knocked down the desk. A box of chalk fell on the floor. Teacher Wei told him to pick it up, but he refused. Teacher Wei pushed him but Zhang Huike wouldn't listen! Soon, most of the chalk had been crushed on the floor. Teacher Wei doesn't treasure chalk like Teacher Gao. Teacher Gao always tells us the school has no money. We can't afford much chalk. He teaches us to treasure the chalk…I know Teacher Gao won't throw away even the smallest piece. I remember once I tossed a small piece in the corner. Teacher Gao saw it, and he picked it up. He held it between his fingertips, and used it to write one more word. The last stroke he wrote with the chalk left on his finger. I feel very sad. A whole box of white chalk became a box of black dust. If Teacher Gao knew, he would be sad, too."[25]

This scene is the first time in which we hear the film's theme music, which is the only musical score in the entire film. The film's theme music is used sparingly and always intentionally, and it purposefully links the discourse on chalk with Wei Minzhi's tearful plea on national television. The scene's context also links the musical theme to a broader discourse on Chinese educational values. Through the student's reading the diary, the presence of the *teacher* (*laoshi*) reclaims the classroom space as a voice of authority.[26] Zhang Huike, albeit accidentally, diffuses and rebukes the moral validity of Wei's mission and her understanding of teacherhood. A look of shame appears on Wei's face as the diary is read aloud. While Wei's behavior up to this point has been more like a factory boss (*laoban*), the reading of the student's diary functions as a "lecture" which calls upon her to live up to the cultural ideal of the *laoshi*.[27] Wei is reduced to the status of a student on equal footing with her classmates, being reprimanded by the *laoshi*

[25] *Not One Less,* 32:54 to 34:15.
[26] 老师
[27] 老板

with a homily on the importance of chalk. The musical theme imbues the scene with an emotional tenderness which suggests that it is only superficially a lesson in frugality. This lecture functions in the film as the beginning of Wei Minzhi's moral education, in which she learns something about what it means to really treasure something as inherently valuable.

The shift in discussion from "foreignness" and "singularity" to one of "moral education" is not accidental, although it raises one obvious objection. Up till this point I have been meticulously systematizing the narrative of the "rare object" as existing primarily in a context in which it is retrieved from outside the *cosmos*, and acquiring value because it is perceived as exotic, foreign and other. But the magnetism between Wei Minzhi and Zhang Huike is totally absent of any exotic or foreign charge, thus subverting the assumption that the transcendent value lies in the province of the external or the exotic. This further underscores the necessity of interpreting value through the lens of the broader anthropological phenomenon. The anthropological system of value seeks the object which has the quality of oneness—the assumption that this object can *only* be accessed through participation with the exotic is in fact a religious trapping which arises from the myth of disenchantment: the myth of world picture. In *Not One Less,* the value of the child is successfully reasserted, but this effect is achieved less through exoticizing his rural character as much as simply through the sheer *physical distance* Wei Minzhi has traversed and labor she has exerted to acquire him. Technology does indeed play a role here, as appearing on national television garners sympathy for "rural China" and allows Wei Minzhi to return home with an abundance of resources. However, this economic burst of resources can only be achieved through the community's mimetic engagement with the original "value producer," whose creative powers lie not within her own individual self, but through a co-creative process she enacts with her student, a participation in the eternal student/teacher

relationship. The film's primary thematic emphasis lies primarily in revealing this internal paradigm shift. In the scene where Wei receives a homily on the value of chalk, the metaphor between the chalk and the child becomes explicit, linked by the film's main musical theme. Wei has effortlessly achieved the emotion of "the mother stitching for her traveling son," not by means of manufacturing and industry, but rather by actualizing the work of love itself.

Conclusion: Sunset in the Age of World Picture

In this essay, I have attempted to show how the word "value" exists on a semantic spectrum between *quantitative* and *qualitative*, an ambiguity which is often both disguised and exploited in discourses on value. These discourses remain stubbornly unintelligible unless we address "value" as primarily a qualitative phenomenon, and the quantitative understanding as merely the reification of a more elusive reality. Using the phrase "mode of production" when talking about value forces us to encounter a particular resistance which exposes the illusion that true value production is a matter of technique. Figures like Ma Ke in *Useless,* who attempt to access transcendent values by means of technique, depend on their participation in the narrative of disenchantment for their success. But the fact that filmmakers like Jia Zhangke and Zhang Yimou attempt in their films to tap into an alternative discourse on value indicates that this illusion is not hegemonic. Both Jia and Zhang show to us that enchantment does not rely on the myth of disenchantment. This narrative indirectly challenges the Heideggerian assumption that transcendent values can only be evoked by escaping the mythic spaces of modernity. In particular, the way *Not One Less* portrays a public atonement through the embrace of the mediatized image communicates a different kind of myth in which technology is not presented as an obstacle to enchantment. These films present a vision in which the value is not measured in

terms of monetary or exotic quality, but relational quality. Perhaps this narrative will be the new way of picturing the world.

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