

"THE YEAR 1967 WILL BE CHINESE"

The year 1967 was Chinese.¹⁰ In Paris signs of Maoism's popularity abounded. Mao-collared suits—"les cols 'Maos"—had become immensely fashionable. Try as they might, the clothing boutiques in Paris's tony sixteenth arrondissement could not keep them in stock. For their part, Left Bank booksellers were perpetually selling out of *Quotations from Chairman Mao. Lui*, the French equivalent of *Playboy*, decided to jump on the pro-Chinese bandwagon by featuring an eight-page spread of scantily clad models in straw hats, red stars, and Red Guard attire. The accompanying captions were culled from the Little Red Book. One striking image portrayed a young woman, unclad and equipped with an automatic rifle, emerging from an enormous white cake. "The revolution is not a dinner party," read the legend.¹¹

In the world of cinema Jean-Luc Godard's *La Chinoise*, an alternately whimsical and propagandistic attempt to fathom the wave of Sinophilia cresting in Paris that year, became a succès de scandale. Godard was at the zenith of his cinematic talents. *Weekend*, his breakthrough portrayal of bourgeois decadence, had been released to immense critical acclaim that spring.

Godard described his intentions in an August 1967 interview in *Le Monde*:

Why *La Chinoise*? Because everywhere people are speaking about China. Whether it's a question of oil, the housing crisis, or education, there is always the Chinese example. China proposes solutions that are unique. . . . What distinguishes the Chinese Revolution and is also emblematic of the Cultural Revolution is *Youth*: the moral and scientific quest, free from prejudices. One

¹⁰ Hamon and Rotman, *Génération* 1:329.

¹¹ Han Suyin, "La Chine aux mille vertus," *Lui*, June 1967, 36. I am very grateful to Ron Haas for pointing out this side of the Maoist intoxication in his dissertation "The Death of the Angel" (PhD diss., Rice University, 2006).

can't approve of all its forms . . . but this unprecedented cultural fact demands a minimum of attention, respect, and friendship.¹²

La Chinoise was filmed almost entirely in a private apartment at 15, rue Miromesnil, in Paris. The spatial isolation made the film seem something like a gauchiste Robinsonade. The young Maoists had completely turned their backs on the corruptions and lures of bourgeois society. As such, the film became a laboratory experiment or testing ground for the viability of left-wing ideology.

Godard had originally intended to examine the respective merits of Chinese and Soviet Marxism. However, by the time he started filming, the senescence of the Soviet model seemed self-evident.

To the annoyance of viewers with more conventional cinematic expectations, much of *La Chinoise* consisted of didactic political harangues culled from the texts of Saint-Just, Lenin, and, of course, the Great Helmsman himself. It was a tactic Godard had imbibed from Brecht's so-called didactic plays (*Lehrstücke*) and was intended to upend the pretensions of cinematic and theatrical realism. Godard employed the technique to discomfit or "alienate" the viewer: to strip the filmgoer of his or her most reassuring illusions. Plot, narrative, character development—these were some of the vestiges of bourgeois "affirmative" cinema that Godard summarily jettisoned as ideologically compromised. By highlighting the constructed or fabricated nature of cinematic experience, the director hoped to disrupt the complacency with which cinemagoers customarily viewed films. Thereby, Godard sought to remove cinema once and for all from the world of entertainment or modern consumerism.

Fortunately, *La Chinoise* also contained moments of levity reminiscent of the director's pathbreaking nouvelle vague films, as in the scene where the young philosophy student Véronique (played by Godard's wife, Anna Wiazemsky) declares: "The Revolution is an uprising, an act of violence whereby one class overthrows another. As for me, I'm

¹²Jean-Luc Godard, interview with Jean Baby, *Le Monde*, August 24, 1967, 10.

in philosophy class." At that point the screen cuts to an image of the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

La Chinoise ends with a lengthy political debate between Véronique and her real-life Nanterre philosophy professor Francis Jeanson—a "Sartrean" who had won notoriety during the Algerian War as a "porteur de valise," or money handler, for the FLN¹³—over the merits of revolutionary violence. At one point Véronique impetuously declares that she wants to "shut down the university with bombs." Jeanson points out that when he was a militant he had an entire people backing his actions. Conversely, Véronique and her fellow Maoists are politically isolated. "I think you are heading down a path that is a perfect dead end," Jeanson concludes resignedly, although, for his part, Godard would later claim that at the time he was more sympathetic to Véronique's point of view.¹⁴

La Chinoise went a long way toward boosting Maoism's political-chic quotient. Within a few years, numerous celebrities would clamber on board the Maoist bandwagon. As one observer cynically observed, among Left Bank intellectuals "radical chic became a form of moral tax deduction."¹⁵ What filmmaker apart from Godard could get away with including the following Althusserian rhetorical gem in a feature film: "The idea of permanent revolution is only valid if the diversity and determination of the teams of political economists allow them to overcome the uncertainties of the conjuncture."¹⁶

Godard went on to make several other pro-Chinese films—including *The Wind from the East* (1969) and *See You at Mao* (1971)—during his stint as a "guerrilla filmmaker"¹⁷ with the Dziga Vertov group, which Godard cofounded with fellow director Jean-Pierre Gorin. In 1970, when the Maoist daily *La Cause du Peuple* was impounded by the Pompidou government and its editors imprisoned, Godard was among the prominent French intellectuals who defied the ban by hawking the proscribed broadsheet on the boulevards of Paris.

¹³ See Hamon and Rotman, *Porteurs de valise*.

¹⁴ Godard, *Jean-Luc Godard*, 303.

¹⁵ Caute, *Year of the Barricades*, 259.

¹⁶ Godard, *Made in USA*, 1967.

If by filming *La Chinoise* Godard's aim had been to ingratiate himself with the Maoist student militants, who had pointedly refused to appear in the film, his efforts fell short. A celebrated May 1968 graffiti mocked the Swiss director as "le plus con des suisses pro-Chinois" (the biggest ass among the Swiss pro-Chinese).

THE "NORMAL SCHOOL"

The Maoist temptation began among a group of Louis Althusser's students at the Ecole normale supérieure. The ENS is a training ground for France's intellectual elite. Those who are accepted receive a four-year stipend. Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Raymond Aron, Louis Althusser, and Michel Foucault were all ENS graduates.¹⁷

The students' attraction to Maoism had been piqued by the Sino-Soviet rift of the early 1960s. In 1963 the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party had openly challenged the Soviet Union's leadership of the international Communist movement. The Soviets abruptly recalled some fourteen hundred technicians and experts from China, seriously disrupting Chinese industrial development.

The PCF, headed by a group of unregenerate Stalinists, had become the embodiment of ideological rigidity. In 1956, to the dismay of fellow travelers like Sartre, it unhesitatingly backed the brutal Soviet invasion of Hungary. By the mid-1960s, however, its servility to Moscow had become something of an embarrassment. Increasingly, it had difficulty finding recruits among France's vaunted caste of intellectual mandarins. The PCF recycled the same old "workerist" political line. But increasingly, its slogans were out of touch with the realities of French occupational life, where the ranks of white-collar and service-industry workers were swelling. Moreover, the party was consistently tone-deaf

¹⁷ For the relevant background, see Henri Bourgin, *L'Ecole normale et la politique: De Jean Jaurès à Léon Blum* (Paris: Fayard, 1938). See also Diane Rubenstein, *What's Left? The Ecole normale supérieure and the Right* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990).