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JEAN-FRANÇOIS CÔTÉ earned his Ph.D. in visual arts and art history at Université Laval with a grant from the Fonds québécois de recherche sur la société et la culture. Solo exhibitions include presentations at the Studio d'essai of Méduse; at VU; at the Museo de Arte Contemporaneo in the context of the 8th Bienal de Video Y Nuevos Medios de Santiago, Chile; in the context of the Mois Multi; and at the Yuanfen Gallery of Beijing, China. Côté was Professor in Time-Based Art and Photography at York University in Toronto. He is now Professor in Media Art at Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières. He received support from the Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec and from the Canada Council for the Arts.

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CHORUS : RUMINATION
ON THE NOBILITY OF
FACES AND IMAGES

BY YAM LAU

What is difficult to manage is the expression of his face
- Confucius

SNOW IN THE SUMMER

Jean-François Côté's *The Chorus* stages the performance of a celebrated Chinese song. In an inner courtyard of a Taoist temple in Beijing, an amateur choir of retirees is juxtaposed with an individual child performer. The performers sing the celebrated Chinese song "Snow," transcribed from the renowned poem of the same title, written in the nineteen thirties by the young revolutionary Mao Zedong. The older performers would know this song by heart from growing up in Mao's era, while the young child, separated from it by generations, would be learning the song as she performs it.

"Snow" is by no means an exceptional literary work; nonetheless it underscores the young Mao's ambition. The sentiment expressed therein must have also resonated with the revolutionary zeal of the time. The poem invoked the vastness of China, its renowned monuments and heroes within an aggrandized framework of epic imagination. But, Mao also broke rank within its composition. Instead of conferring customary praise on the ancients as most Chinese poets would, he denigrated his predecessors. Through this act of usurpation, Mao delivered his utopian vision: the future leader confidently declared that the achievement of his time will crown the unfolding chronicle that is China. Looking back in time, "Snow" may be the last era in Chinese history in which an ambition of dynastic magnitude can be stated with such unabashed conviction.

CHINA IN THE MAKING

Now that the rhetoric of Mao and the promise of revolution have ran its course, what remains to steer China's mode of self-understanding and national imagination as it moves "forward" in the world stage? From a western perspective, it is difficult to imagine a culture as sedimented in the grandeur of its literary and historical past as China. Despite the various setbacks in China's modernization, nothing has deterred China's propensity to continually call upon an aggrandized historical/mythical matrix to formulate its current understanding of itself. Consider Mao's bombast in "Snow." It can be regarded as a modern attempt in the long tradition of mythological appropriation within China, one that is in fact well integrated within this culture. Today, even as the grand eras of dynastic rule and modern revolution are no longer, such mythological/historical appropriation remains a common exercise in the imagination of the general Chinese populace.

When Côté set out to make *The Chorus*, I understand he was looking for a way to gauge the enormous transformation that has taken place in China since the era of Mao. However, his intention was to not simply explore this transformation *externally* through the search of an appropriate and timely subject such as China's massive urban and industrial development. Côté was interested in China's recent past as a living current and the way it motivates the lives of ordinary Chinese citizens. Few subjects would grant the access necessary to this approach. In choosing "Snow," a popular song that traverses China's rapid transitions from socialist to free market ideology, he wanted to access this social economic transformation *internally*, or affectively as a lived reality. In *The Chorus*, I believe it is through the performative faces of the choir that the entwined destinies of a transforming China and its citizens can be psychologically and spiritually intimated. Henceforth, I regard

The Chorus as a work of portraiture. The following offers an analysis of its mechanism.

FACES AND FRONTIERS

The face speaks. It delivers worlds; it makes them visible as visages.

During the performance of "Snow," the performers' facial expressions, where the vocal and other senses are concentrated and integrated, incarnates the enormous expanse of space, time, and values described within its lyrics. As an expressive agent of sort, the face becomes an active, living frontier from which the epic imaginary that characterizes China is called into the present. The concerted power of the timbre and rhythm within the performance of the lyrics gives rise to states of being and personalities that are rooted and nourished by the grand matrix of China's imaginary self-positioning. I cannot help to take note of the sense of elevation and openness registered on the faces. It is in the process of vocalization that the face (also the entire body) becomes (in)fused with the sentiment of "Snow" as one continuous living tissue.

The Chorus frames and facilitates a dynamic continuity between the face and its invocation. One witnesses the performers enter into a mutually appropriating relation with China's epic imagination. The face, a living frontier in the present, calls the past into being, while the past fulfills the living present with the certainty of grandiosity and character. Both elements constitute and give reality to the other. The effect of this calls the audience into attention.

THE FACE AND THE PICTURE PLANE

The way *The Chorus* manages to amplify the face and its ability to address the viewer, lies in its acute treatment of the picture plane. While the choir is arranged frontally within a compressed space that is paralleled to the picture plane, the camera is positioned to reinforce a resolute awareness of this setup. This condition gives rise to a number of logical parallels that can be

drawn between the figure of the face and the picture plane. For example, I would characterize them as disclosive frontiers through which other "realities" may come to pass. None of them have volume, thickness, depth, perspective or a "reverse side" (in the sense that one cannot get "behind" them). They come into view most effective when approached frontally. The efficacy of *The Chorus* partly owes to its exploitation of the structural analogous between the face and the picture plane, perhaps.

LAST THOUGHT

Of all the faces portrayed in *The Chorus*, I am especially fond of one — the young woman in an elegant Chinese style black dress. Rosée (her nickname) is stationed as an attendant of sort, we see her waiting by the side of the choir, gently coordinating the rank and occasionally making small adjustment to the performers' attire. In this effort to maintain an overall sense of propriety, it would also seem that the entire scene is gathered under her care. Servitude here is elevated to a measure of grace.

Later, close up shots of Rosée's face deliver an innocence that is both refined and lucid. Her composure reveals a quiet joy that is almost entirely anachronistic with the pulse of contemporary time. She did not perform with the choir. But their powerful voice produces a poignant contrast that foregrounds the frail beauty of her face. Somewhere in this scenario, I intuit a premonition of classical China in all its restraint and mystery.