



ASIAN FILM ARCHIVE

From Map to Movie: A Cinematic Cartography of China

by Chia Jie Lin

Orienting Paradise: Western Projections of the East

The Last Emperor (1987)

Director:
Bernardo Bertolucci

Runtime:
163min

Country:
United Kingdom, China, Italy,
France, United States

Language:
English, Mandarin, Japanese

AWARDS

BEST PICTURE
BEST DIRECTOR
BEST CINEMATOGRAPHY
BEST SCREENPLAY - BASED
ON A MATERIAL FROM
ANOTHER MEDIUM
& 5 more
Academy Awards 1988

BEST FILM
BEST COSTUME DESIGN
& 1 more
BAFTA Awards 1989

BEST ORIGINAL SCORE
& 3 more
Golden Globes 1988

In *The Last Emperor* (1987), Italian film director Bernardo Bertolucci offers an imaginative retelling of Puyi's life, from his enthronement at the age of three and his short-lived time as the puppet emperor of the Japanese-controlled Manchukuo (Manchuria), to his life in prison and eventual release. Through Puyi's eyes, we witness the last years of the Qing dynasty, marked by political and social upheaval, and the emergence of the People's Republic of China.

Foreign films like Bertolucci's are not the first imaginaries of the Qing empire and the lives of the imperial family. For centuries, the geographical contours and diverse views of this "Central Kingdom" (中國, zhongguo, a term first coined by the Qing) had been charted and depicted in visual culture. This ranged from imperial "All-Under Heaven" maps to scenic paintings and portraits of Qing emperors and their consorts. We owe this wealth of material culture to Chinese artists, archivists, and cartographers, including the longstanding cultural exchanges with their European counterparts. For one, Yosefa Loshitzky and Raya Meyuhav have remarked on "Italy's continued fascination with China", in part driven by the latter's ability to offer, as Zhang Longxi once described, "a better reservoir for its dreams, fantasies, and utopias" to the West.

Bertolucci, the first Western director allowed to film in the Forbidden City, follows a long line of Italian intellectuals who made it to China, establishing Sino-Italian exchanges. Among them is Venetian merchant Marco Polo (1254-1324), the first Westerner to introduce China to the West. Almost three centuries later in 1582, Italian Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) would arrive in Macau to spread Catholicism to China. In 1601, he became the first-ever European to enter the Forbidden City in the Ming capital of Beijing. As an advisor to the Wanli Emperor (r. 1572-1620), Ricci introduced trigonometry to the court, assisted in astronomy and translated mathematical texts into Mandarin.

In *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said wrote that "the Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences". As early as the 14th century, China was already an exoticised object of the Western gaze, exemplified in publications like *The Travels of Marco Polo* (c. 1300). In



Become an AFA member.
Enjoy a host of benefits
including complimentary
tickets and merchandise as
well as exclusive discounts
with AFA partners. Sign up
now at:
bit.ly/FriendsofAFA

Bertolucci's own words, by the late 20th century, "China had become the front projection of our confused utopias". From Ricci to Bertolucci, these imagined visions of China in both map and movie are similarly symbolic. They offer ways of seeing the world and both ascribe meanings to spatial realities and imaginaries that transcend time and space.

Cinematic Cartographies

In the 19th and 20th centuries, the rise of photography and film offered new ways of mapping empires. Early photographers captured topographical views of landscapes, complementing the work of mapmakers. By the 1850s, photographers were employed as members of survey units, usually of a European colonial nature, while photographs were incorporated into the map production process. In China, photography served similar "colonial ambitions of seeing" as in other parts of Asia. Yet it was also locally appropriated within the Chinese visual economy—as a means of "reproducing manigraphic (hand-drawn) visual productions" in the vein of Chinese traditional painting.

In film, aerial views and 360-degree panoramic shots capture landscapes extensively, resonating with cartography. But more than that, films also function as cultural maps, each with their own set of political, emotional, and narrative symbolics, exploring a myriad of human emotions, expression, and memories. In *Atlas of Emotions* (2002), media scholar Giuliana Bruno has suggested that film "is a mobile map—a map of differences, a production of socio-sexual fragments and cross-cultural travel".

The filmmaker, in this case, Bertolucci, doubles as a cartographer, charting and reimagining the intricate human relationships and stories within the geospatial boundaries of the Forbidden City. As the first director to film this imperial city, he is likewise its first ever "cinematic cartographer", following, again, a long line of cartographers, both Western and Chinese, that have historically mapped the City. Bertolucci, however, is a cartographer of a different nature. What he has captured is not 'history', but his own imagined Forbidden City.

Filmic acts of mapping permeate the scenes of *The Last Emperor*, both within (Puyi's world) and beyond it (in Bertolucci's vision). The limits of Puyi's world are mapped by his voyeuristic eunuchs and Dowager Consorts who dictate where he could go and who he could meet, as well as the camera. What strikes me is the scene of his first lesson as emperor: learning the layout of his new home. A eunuch uses a miniature model to teach him the names and functions of the different buildings in the palace to provide the boy with his bearings, all right

before bath time. Yet when young Puyi later sees his wet nurse at the door, he runs to her and cries, “I want to go home, I want to go home.”



Figure 1. image still from *The Last Emperor* (1987, dir. Bernardo Bertolucci), Courtesy of Hanway Films

Fast forward to his youth: a pre-teen and then adolescent Puyi traverses the Forbidden City in a variety of ways—seated on a palanquin (mostly), running from his retainers and scaling walls. His world expands when Scottish academic and tutor Reginald Johnston introduces Western imports to him. In history, Johnston was known for being the only foreigner allowed to enter the Forbidden City’s inner court, which was reserved for the emperor’s personal use. Under Johnston’s tutelage, Puyi learns to ride a Western bicycle. This newfound skill improves his mobility within the City and allows him to escape, even if briefly, from the oppressive attention of his retainers. Due to myopia, Puyi begins wearing prescribed spectacles, much to the chagrin of the eunuchs and Dowager Consorts. Yet despite these attempts to seek freedom, the emperor and we, the audience, are taught, again and again, his limited place in the world.

Curious about the outside world, a teenage Puyi rides his bicycle up to the Meridian Gate (午门). He gets only a short glimpse of the world outside before the guards scramble to shut the doors. The bicycle is later shown to be caned by a eunuch for being “nothing but trouble”. As Johnston describes, “The emperor has been a prisoner in his own palace since the day that he was crowned and remained a prisoner since he abdicated... he’s the only person in China who may not walk out of his own front door. I think the emperor is the loneliest boy on Earth.”

Throughout the film, Puyi's surroundings are limited by tall walls and forbidding doors that lock him in—from the Forbidden City to the Japanese embassy in Beijing, then Manchukuo, and finally a prison. This sense of entrapment reaches a climax when Empress Wanrong, Puyi's last link to his fallen dynasty, is forced to leave after her newborn child is murdered by the Japanese. Puyi chases after the car, but the gates close on him once again, trapping him in his latest prison that is the Imperial Palace of Manchukuo. Though his eunuchs have long been dismissed, his new captors are the Japanese—the puppet masters of Manchukuo.

A Vision of Imperial Order

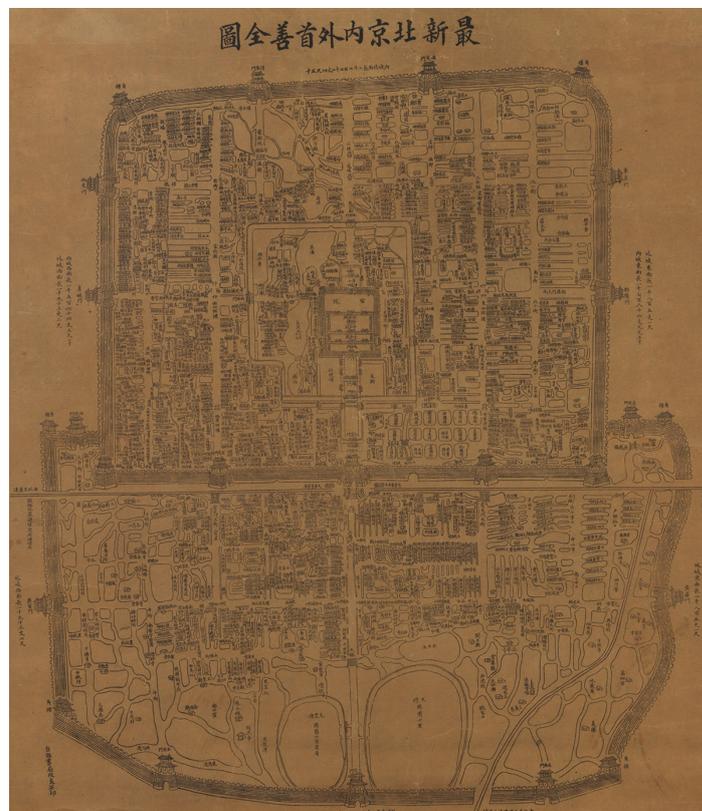


Figure 2. Latest Complete Map of the Inner and Outer Capital of Beijing, Ziqiang Publishing House, China, c. late 19th century, lithograph, ink on paper and mounted on hanging scroll, courtesy of MacLean Collection, Illinois, USA.

The vivid depictions of the Forbidden City in *The Last Emperor* call to my mind a map of Beijing in the National Library's ongoing exhibition: *Mapping the World: Perspectives from Asian Cartography*. The "Latest Complete Map of the Inner and Outer Capital of Beijing" shows a bird's eye view of the Qing imperial capital at the turn of the 20th century. The Forbidden City is centred on the

main north-south axial avenue at the heart of Beijing, paralleling the cosmic centrality of the emperor, or “Son of Heaven” (天子), around which the world revolved.

Access to the Forbidden City was barred to most subjects of the empire, earning it its moniker. Only the emperor could enter any section at will, and government officials and even the imperial family were permitted limited access. From the 15th to 20th centuries, the layout of the palace complex remained largely constant. The urban architecture of Beijing conjured a vision of imperial order and conveyed the political might of the emperor, who sat in the seat of power at the heart of empire. Likewise, historical maps of the city convey the same elements of architectural and political symbolism.

The Last Emperor: Centre of what world?

The emperor’s centrality emerges as well in *The Last Emperor*. Puyi takes centre stage in every scene and “commands attention no matter where he is”. When he approaches within the Forbidden City, his servants avert their gazes and turn their bodies away, reflecting his imperial dominance. Decades later in prison, a dethroned Puyi is still kowtowed to and served by his fellow inmates.

But as cultural critic Rey Chow puts it, Puyi’s centrality is the product of a “doubled gaze”. His command of attention is passive, “indistinguishable from the experience of being watched and followed everywhere” and reflects “the absolutely forlorn inner existence of a man whose outer environment bespeaks the most extraordinary visual splendor”. Bertolucci’s re-imagining of the Qing emperor differs from Chinese cartographic efforts (e.g. the Map of Beijing) which conjure a vision of imperial order that asserts the emperor’s political power.

Plural Cartographies

The Map of Beijing’s earliest predecessor, Qianlong’s Complete Map of Beijing, is not free from Western influence. It was produced in 1750 by Chinese official Hai Wang (海望), court painter Shen Yuan (沈源) and yet another Italian Jesuit brother – Giuseppe Castiglione (1688-1766). From Matteo Ricci to Giuseppe Castiglione, the continued contributions of European Jesuits to Ming and Qing maps of China reveal pluralistic perspectives that have shaped Chinese cartographic traditions.

Yet the Western contribution in these cases merely informed, and did not dictate, Ming and Qing world views. Up till the 20th century, Chinese emperors and mapmakers continued to imagine the world on their own terms – a world where China was the Central Kingdom (中国)—in “All Under Heaven” maps of the empire. Likewise, maps of Beijing made by Chinese and Manchu mapmakers were products of self-representation, serving administrative functions, and communicating political power.

In contrast, Bertolucci’s own gaze appears in full force in *The Last Emperor*. As Rey Chow has critiqued, China is cast “in a feminized, ethnicised and exoticised position in relation to a Western gaze”. The gradual erasure of women, feminisation of the Forbidden City and by association, the symbolic castration of Puyi, as well as voyeurism of the eunuchs and Dowager Consorts, among other orientalist elements, show how Puyi’s life is reframed through a Western lens. China, bound up in the persona of Puyi, becomes the primitive “Other” that is feminised, scrutinised, and coerced into submission. The film is a mapping of Bertolucci’s own aesthetics of desire; the Italian auteur explains the reasons for his interest in producing the film: “I think it is a very Italian movie...operatic, like Italian opera, and I think it one [sic] of my more Italian movies. I am a bit fed up with reality in my country – even here, everywhere in the West, and so I go looking for a cultural atmosphere which has not been completely invaded and polluted and suffocated and killed by consumerism monoculture. And that’s why China is okay.”

From the map to the movie, these imagined visions of China thus carry their own set of symbolisms. Despite their historical resonances, these re-imaginings ultimately depart from each other. In contrast to maps like the Map of Beijing, which reflect a Chinese world view, Bertolucci and *The Last Emperor* are, borrowing Zhang Longxi’s words, “obviously not concerned with China per se but with learning about the self in the West”.

First published in Asian Film Archive on 4 April 2022.

Jie Lin is an assistant curator at the National Library Board, Singapore. She has co-curated *Human x Nature: Environmental Histories of Singapore* (2021) and *Mapping the World: Perspectives of Asian Cartography* (2021).

*This version has been edited for length.