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Ma Chine à remonter le temps

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# Introduction. Retrospection, anticipation, long-term fieldwork

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Translator: Matthew Cunningham

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# **Introduction. Retrospection, anticipation, long-term fieldwork**

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"This might be the most mind-blowing fact I learned this year: China used more cement in the last three years than the U.S. used in the entire 20th century"  
(Bill Gates on Twitter, 12 December 2014)<sup>1</sup>

1. In 2010, the map of the city of Nanjing showed a metro station, even though it did not yet exist. It seemed that the cartographers had preferred to anticipate the future change rather than risk seeing their maps quickly fall into obsolescence. Cities are changing of course, and to observe such discrepancies is nothing new; the inaccuracy of the map at the time of its publication could also have been explained by a delay in the metro construction works, or might have been linked to an impreciseness—not uncommon in China—in the drawing of maps that are mainly intended for tourists. However, this fact not only leads one to note a change to come (*where there is no station, there will be one*), it also implicitly evokes the question of the characterisation of change, and more generally that of relations with time (*the pace of change is so quick that the temporal gap between the map showing the station and its actual construction seems sufficiently short to be accepted as one single present time*). Thus for a while, the Nanjing map kept a trace of a present shaped by the prospect of an anticipated future: that of a modern city preparing to welcome visitors from all over the world for Expo 2010 in Shanghai (from May to October of that year). After a few months, reality ended up catching up with the map.
2. Another such discrepancy could be observed a few years later in Shanghai, but in that case, reality differed not by a few months, but by a few metres. In 2017, the Yufo Temple was moved thirty metres from its original site with its indoor facilities and its statues, thanks to particularly elaborate engineering mechanics, in order to enlarge the space in front of the temple. Filmed daily, the displacement took only fifteen days.<sup>2</sup> In China, it seems that the time is gone when "old things" were totally demolished, as they especially were during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). The time has also passed when monuments were deconstructed stone-by-stone with a view to rebuilding them in a more favourable elsewhere;<sup>3</sup> now the buildings roll and slide, while others walks, to *anticipate* the consequences of urban transformations, or prepare for possible future dangers.<sup>4</sup>
3. Whereas the Nanjing metro station was *not yet* quite there, the Shanghai temple was *no longer* quite there—and was consequently *no longer* quite itself. This observation recalls questions long debated by philosophers who have discussed notions of *identity* and *time* (*being* and *having been*), questioning their irreconcilability (Fabre, 2014: 84). The "paradox of the Ship of Theseus" sums up the complexity of the problem: Athenians wanting to preserve the ship navigated by Theseus, the victorious hero of the epic battle against the minotaur, continued to replace the boat's planks in order to perpetuate that vessel which time would inevitably alter. Their actions updated an object of the past that even originated in mythical times. The boat's material having been completely changed after several years, to what extent was it still the "Ship of Theseus"? Had this continual change not created a new ship different from the original? This debate has occupied Western philosophers as well as heritage actors, who have since renewed its terms (Fabre, 2016). In China, this paradox seems not to be a paradox at all, and there are very different ways to bring about perpetuity there; for example, in temples, the works of preceding times are not preserved as proof of an antiquity. Instead they are replaced and hidden by the new, which symbolises the fervour of the religious community. An ancient temple is not an object admired for the cracks that evince a few historical periods, but rather for its place in the present, since it has been *re-made* with the most contemporary materials. As Simon Leys writes: "Chinese architecture is essentially made of perishable and fragile materials; it embodies a sort of 'in-built obsolescence'; it decays rapidly and requires frequent rebuilding. [...] [In China,] eternity should not inhabit the building, it should inhabit the builder. The transient nature of the construction is like an offering to the voracity of time; for the price of such sacrifices, the constructors ensure the everlastingness of their spiritual designs" (2008).<sup>5</sup> Although cyclically destroyed and reconstructed, the monument remains "authentically" that which it is (and has always been).
4. The anticipatory map of Nanjing and the displaced Shanghai temple raise the question of perpetuity in a different way: in these cases, "it *will be that*" already seems to be closely interwoven with "it *was*"

1. <https://twitter.com/billgates/status/543410052494024704> (accessed 13 May 2021). Bill Gates is basing his assertion on statistics published by historian and political analyst Vaclav Smil in his book *Making the Modern World: Materials and Dematerialization* (2013).

2. See the press article "Shanghai's historic Jade Buddha Temple moved 30 metres to accommodate more visitors" published in the *South China Morning Post* on 21 September 2017 (<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/2112222/shanghais-historic-jade-buddha-temple-moved-30-metres-accommodate>, accessed 13 July 2021).

3. See for example the thesis work by Katiana LE MENTEC (2006: 7).

4. See the video "Old Chinese building 'walks' to new location to make way for Shanghai's new commercial centre" posted on YouTube by *South China Morning Post*, 21 October 2020 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gwu4ovaSiQY>, accessed 14 May 2021).

5. See the more nuanced view of Françoise LAUWAERT, who examines Simon Leys's well-known argument in light of the colossal losses of heritage in the twentieth century: "While the modernisation of cities of all sizes continues at breakneck speed and we are witnessing the radical transformation of ways of living and inhabiting, traces of the past cannot be read in everyday life as easily as in Leys's time." (2012: 47).

and “it is that”. These two examples show a relationship with time that is redeveloping in light of the major social changes China has been undergoing for more than four decades. The end of the Maoist regime and the open door policy implemented in 1978 generated profound changes in Chinese society. The system of “socialism with Chinese characteristics” (*Zhongguo tese shehuizhuyi* 中国特色社会主义)—which enabled both the maintenance of the party-state and the integration of the People’s Republic of China into global capitalism, as well as its inclusion in large international bodies (responsible for issues of security, economy, and culture)—produced within Chinese society new spaces in which relations between the state and society were reconfigured, giving rise to entirely new forms of social organisation and novel ways of life. “Individuals in China, thus, have to negotiate different moralities, including those of the capitalist market and the socialist state, as well as local ideas about social relations, community, fairness, and good governance” (Pieke, 2014: 125); all areas of individuals’ social life underwent change.

5. The point of departure and driving force of those decades of change lie at the heart of the reflection of certain theorists of social change who seek to rethink their paradigms and methods based on the Chinese case, moving away from views overly centred on Europe and the United States. It is this oft-described *turn* that, for example, is the subject of theorisation attempts by sociologists of “transition” (*zhuanxing* 转型)<sup>6</sup> and thinkers of “postmodernism” (*houxiandai zhuyi* 后现代主义),<sup>7</sup> based on exchanges between universities inside and outside China. In their view, the point is to understand the (at first glance contradictory) coexistence of so-called “ante-capitalist”, “capitalist”, and “post-capitalist” regimes. If these debates are undoubtedly useful for analysing large-scale social processes and characterising temporal and logical reference points as markers of change in progress, the anthropological approach is more interested in individuals’ social perception of events, as well as their private experience of past, present, and future times. As Monica Heintz and Isabelle Rivoal wrote, there is a great “need to take into consideration the temporal experience of actors who were witnesses to those changes, to supplement ‘facts’ otherwise documented” (2014: 391). This is because “personal experience of time is subjective, but when that experience is collectively shared, this subjectivity is the basis of a new reality, *an era*” (*ibid.*: 396). So what is this Chinese “era” in which temples are moved to anticipate future changes, or a metro station is placed on a map before even being built? More broadly, what is this Chinese “era” in which numerous, accelerated, large-scale transformations give change a novel dynamic? The ethnological discipline, precisely because it is endeavours to base itself on prolonged, revisited field inquiries, is particularly well-placed to understand this “era”, if only by describing in detail places and situations that will have radically changed or even ceased to exist a few years later.<sup>8</sup>
6. The authors of this issue of *Ateliers d’anthropologie* wanted to explore social change in continental China and Taiwan, not by choosing to study a subject that would constitute an *a priori* change, but rather by casting a reflexive eye on their ethnographies in search of clues that would *a posteriori* make it possible to highlight certain facets of this change, and of how the people themselves understand it.<sup>9</sup> For this reason, analysis of the conditions of the temporal experience the ethnologists had shared (or coproduced) with their interlocutor(s) led them to more particularly examine the term *fazhan* 发展 in all the complexity of its various meanings. It is commonly used in China to very broadly designate the “development” or “expansion” of the country and—on more specific and markedly different registers—its economy, culture and cities. This expression was certainly a powerful political argument in speeches made by PRC leader Deng Xiaoping a few years after the end of Maoism (“development is a fundamental principle” he declared in 1992<sup>10</sup>), but it is nevertheless not to be reduced solely its applications by Party ideologues, who use it both to describe a change and to lay foundations for their political project. In various contexts, the term is also employed by the people themselves to express

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6. These theories are presented in an article by ZHANG Lun (2007), who see the transition in China as going in three directions (towards post-communism, towards modernity, and towards accelerated globalisation), and in an article by SUN Liping in a collective book (2008) who strives to found a fully-fledged field of research borrowing its method from the sociology of practice. This new field would make it possible to go beyond the sociohistorical conditions of the birth of sociology (which are too specifically linked to the emergence of “capitalist civilisation” in Western societies), in order to examine the *capitalist turn* in the former Soviet Union, in Eastern European countries, and in China.

7. In an introduction to an issue dedicated to the question of postmodernity, Arif DIRLIK and ZHANG Xudong describe the issues surrounding the use of this notion as mobilised in Chinese intellectual circles since the mid-1980s. In their view, postmodernity makes it possible to conceive of temporalities and translate the experience of time (1997: 8–9). The whole point of this question is to designate the *post*-(Mao) period after the one regarded as “modern”. See a brief introduction to these debates in the editorial by WANG and SONG (2015).

8. Taken a step further, these questions raise another one, on a philosophical level: when transformations are constant, can one still speak of changes, or could one see this as a continuity of a different order?

9. This issue of *Ateliers d’anthropologie* grew out of reflections initiated in the “China Workshop” seminar, organised by Brigitte Bapandier over many years at the Laboratoire d’ethnologie et de sociologie comparative. We wish to sincerely thank her, and all of the seminar participants. One session in particular was dedicated to the theme “Field site(s) in China(s)” in March 2015. These exchanges continued on the occasion of a panel discussion organised by Claire Vidal during the 5th Conference of the Asia & Pacific Network (GIS ASIE) in September 2015. We would also like to thank Stéphane Gros, who kindly agreed to read and comment on this introduction, and Anthony Stavrianakis who gave us the benefit of his attentive and curious eye as editor of this issue, and also the anonymous evaluators. Finally, thanks to Emmanuel Grimaud for suggesting the title, and Sandrine Soriano for her careful proofreading.

10. Extracts from those speeches (in Chinese, *Fazhan cai shi ying daoli* 发展才是硬道理) were posted online with a French translation on the website of the China Academy of Translation ([http://french.china.org.cn/china/archives/china\\_key\\_words/2018-10/31/content\\_69269621.htm](http://french.china.org.cn/china/archives/china_key_words/2018-10/31/content_69269621.htm), accessed 14 May 2021). For a brief contextualisation, see BERGÈRE, 2000: 261–262.

their own aspirations, or more simply to make sense of changes they are experiencing and speak about them positively, like the Daoist monk who, observing the transformation of the landscape adjacent to his temple (where many rice fields and other terraced cultivations had been either replaced by orchards or laid fallow, particularly owing to the young people's exodus to the cities), concluded his explanation with these words: "Society has to develop! And it is developing very quickly..."<sup>11</sup> *Fazhan* thus expresses a desired or inevitable state of affairs, and a projection arousing enthusiasm or fear. It is also a driving force in local and national life that makes it possible to give a meaning to passing time, through stories that are supposed to describe transitions, continuities and abrupt changes. These stories recount past, present or future time. They constitute a necessary grammar enabling everyone to shape their experience of change.

7. In this introduction, we will attempt to understand how the large-scale change that has been characteristic of China over the past forty years (and is still in progress) is conceived of and orchestrated in different contexts by the Chinese people themselves, often with much inventiveness. Firstly, we will examine this change through three of their discursive tools: a postcard film, a heritage valorisation action, and two works of science fiction (one blockbuster film and one short story). Secondly, we will attempt to assess the epistemological value of searching our own ethnographies for elements that were not necessarily significant at the time when they were observed, but with hindsight constitute particularly enlightening concrete cases of change in progress. Thirdly and finally, we will show how these observations of different kinds could make it possible to isolate at least three inductive forms of change apprehension from an anthropological point of view.

## Stories of time, the grammar of change

### "The Road to Our Beautiful Life" or the ideology of China's high-speed development

8. Stories about the transitions China underwent between the late nineteenth century and early twenty-first century are central to veritable political initiatives that inform on ways of writing an "official history". According to Damien Morier-Genoud (2021: 144), this can be defined as

a body of coherent, unanimous discourse, formulated orally or in writing, or offered visually, such as through images or monuments. [...] Mobilising and invoking a particular vision and story of a strictly national history, [this discourse] gives meaning to past achievements of which Chinese power is supposed to be both guardian and legatee, while it also supports the political choices that this power makes in the present, and for the future.

The official narrative therefore tidies up the past to legitimise the present time, that of a China that has become a major international power.<sup>12</sup>

9. Although this official history is not solely written by representatives of the party-state, it cannot escape the framework established by the 1981 Resolution,<sup>13</sup> which placed limits on how historical events are assessed. The political authorities are busily purveying transitional grand narratives, broadly relayed by efficient propaganda tools, while academics are now trying to "depart from the revolution paradigm that informs official history, in order to attempt to rethink, over the long term, the modernisation ventures that China has flirted with since the modern era [...]" (*ibid.*: 156). Over the past few years, the aim of holders of power and historians has been to mark out a *Chinese way*, or as Anne Cheng writes (2021: 15), to "rethink China in its own terms", more or less explicitly responding to a desire that has become nationalistic: to write a narrative that singularises China within a universal history. We are to understand that China has reached this (glorious) present time by shaping *its own* modernity; this *strictly Chinese way* summons a revival of a certain imperial past, and is developed as a kind of revenge against Western imperialism, blamed for slowing the modernisation process begun in the late nineteenth century, a lapse that Chinese society is said to have brilliantly made up for in recent years (Morier-Genoud, 2021: 150–152).

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11. In Chinese: *Xianzai shehui yao fazhan, zhege shehui fazhan henkuai* 现在社会要发展, 这个社会发展很快 (Adeline Herrou, ethnographic film *Maître Feng. Un moine taoïste dans la Chine d'aujourd'hui*, 2018, 72 min, here at 44 min 46 sec).

12. This way of establishing the authority of the regime in place through history is not extraneous to ancient China's historiographical practices, as studied by Léon VANDERMEERSCH. He wrote: "Chinese history [produced by Imperial China's literati and compilers] mirrors behaviours that were adopted at every historical *moment*, and that the historian evaluates for the edification of posterity based on retrospective observation, of the adequacy of lack thereof in the behaviour chosen at a fateful turning point, of what that *moment* harbours in terms of a *propensity* to success or failure" (2007: 67).

13. The "Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party since the Founding of the People's Republic of China", adopted in June 1981 by the Eleventh Central Committee under the regime of Deng Xiaoping.

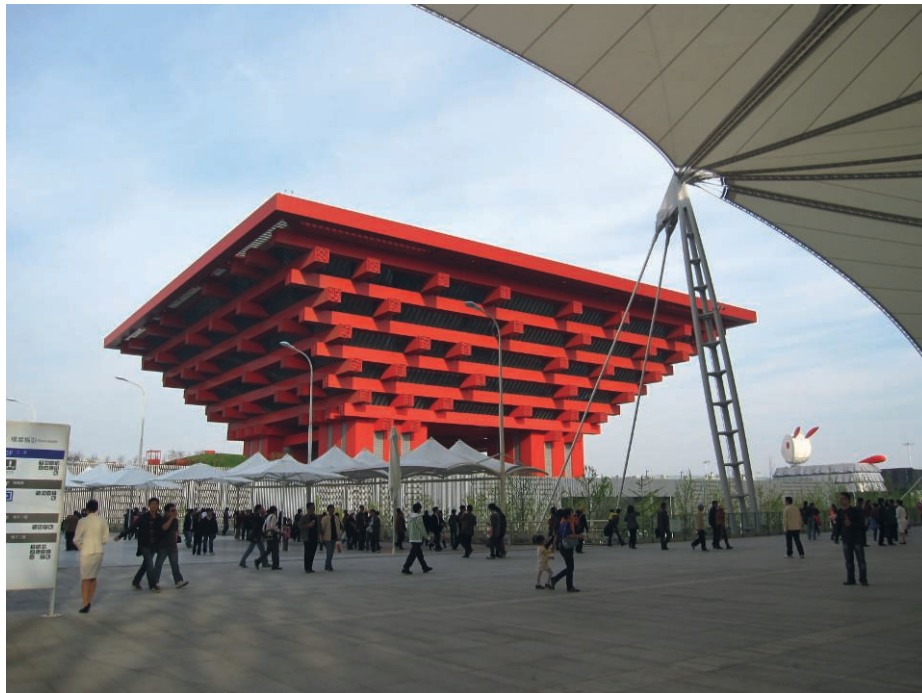
10. This ideologised interpretation of history was quite spectacularly on display in the form of a short film screened in the China pavilion at Expo 2010 in Shanghai, which has since become the China Art Museum (*Zhonghua yishu gong* 中华艺术宫).<sup>14</sup> Before entering the panoramic film theatre (which one is obliged to pass through to reach the exhibition), visitors saw screens displaying the red LED characters: *Chuntian de gushi* 春天的故事, "Story of Spring", the name of a very popular patriotic song celebrating the changes launched by Deng Xiaoping in 1978, a chant that alludes to his journey through the southern provinces in 1992, during which he evoked the importance of the "development" (*fazhan*) mentioned above. Here, spring's awakening is the celebration of *fazhan*. Then, in a theatre with a 700-person capacity, on three screens 22 metres wide and 7.5 metres high, viewers watched the story of Chinese society's advance towards a "harmonious urbanisation" (*hexie chengshi* 和谐城市), a concept that echoed the exhibition's slogan "Better City, Better Life", and more broadly appeared to be a version of the "harmonious society" ideology developed under the presidency of Hu Jintao based on multiple, partial references to Confucian concepts (particularly *he* 和, "harmony"). Presented as the main attraction of the China pavilion, which was itself the main attraction of Expo 2010, this eight-minute film was an invitation—as the title suggested—to take a trip back down "The Road to Our Beautiful Life" (the official English translation of the Chinese title *Licheng* 历程, which means "the process", "the path travelled").<sup>15</sup> At an accelerated pace, it unrolls the tread of time by following four generations of men from the same family. Their story is related through a succession of evocative images similar to paintings, the soundtrack alternating between grandiloquent arias, children's laughter, sounds of calming nature, and those of a dynamic city. The setup with three gigantic hemispheric screens—a central one facing the audience and two others slightly angled to the sides—contributes to that impression of an animated painting. Sometimes the film projected on the screens breaks up into several images that fluidly appear and disappear, while at other times the three screens juxtapose scenes that seem to make up a mosaic. The viewer is plunged into the tableau vivant.
11. The film opens with the wrinkled face of the "father" (*fuqin* 父亲). This white-bearded old man is the embodiment of the elder who remained in the village. He symbolises "tradition" and "ancestral wisdom". He is facing his adult "son" (*erzi* 儿子), who is leaving him to set off over the plains, mountains and waterways, accompanied by his wife and a dozen others, towards of the city, which appears on a still-misty horizon. This is the China of forty years ago, that of the early days of urbanisation, or as the exhibition catalogue explains, it is the time of the emergence of a "dialogue between the generations", of a "dialogue between the city and country, between the new city and the ancestors' country". On the screen is a succession of images of big industry, construction sites and underground conduits, accompanied by a commotion of construction noises and courageous cries. The city emerges from the depths of the mines up to the cranes that fill the sky. The smiling faces of determined workers emphasize urbanisation on the march. Then, the dusty body of the son is washed; like the other workers, he dives into the clear water of the ocean, in which the well-known skyline of the city of Shanghai is reflected.<sup>16</sup> The horizon is getting clearer.
12. The son looks at his father; the city is now built and welcomes his "grandson" (*sunbei* 孙辈). Still a child, he runs through the streets affectionately calling his "grandpa" and his "daddy". He is part of the "generation that grew up in the city"; "he has absorbed the wisdom of his ancestors' generation", and as the catalogue suggests, even if there have been many changes, he has not strayed from attachment to family and traditions. The years 1978 and 1982 distinctly appear; the post-Maoist era is beginning, that of Deng Xiaoping's open door policies. The black-and-white images of industry gain colour. On the middle screen, the child runs accompanied by the sound of a traditional opera. He meets a procession of happy people, dancing and shaking red scarves; his father and mother are there. Time passes: a heavy bell repeatedly rings, a revolving door turns like the hands of a clock; we see a succession of dates from 1990 to 2005. Then comes 2008: the terror of an earthquake in Sichuan grips all of China.<sup>17</sup> Now an adult, the grandson comes to the aid of his compatriots, who are being valiantly rescued by the army. While lending a hand to the soldiers, he meets his future wife. The drama is over; CGI images by architects reveal the project to rebuild a new city.

14. The information on this film comes from our own respective observations in 2010 and 2011, and from the catalogue of the China pavilion published with the title 城市发展中的中华智慧 *Chinese Wisdom in Urban Development* (Shanghai Shibohui Shiwu xietiao ju, 2010). There exists a new English version entitled *Chinese Wisdom in Urban Development: A Pictorial Interpretation of the China National Pavilion* (Guo Wanxin, 2010).

15. Even though the film was simply presented as "Thematic Movie 1" during Expo 2010 and in the catalogue, it was co-directed by Lu Chuan 陆川 and Fan Yingwei 范英伟; "Thematic Movie 2" — "Harmonious China" (*Hexie Zhongguo* 和谐中国) was by Zheng Dasheng 郑大圣 (SCHNEIDER, 2019: 125).

16. In the Chinese context, water is a well-known symbol of wisdom that the pavilion's creative director did not fail to seize upon (NÉVOT, 2014: 122). Wisdom was a recurrent theme in the pavilion (HÉROU, 2015).

17. The Sichuan earthquake (magnitude 7.9) struck the Longmen Mountains on 12 May 2008. The losses were heavy: over 80,000 dead or missing, 370,000 wounded and over 5 million made homeless (see the website *l'Encyclopædia Universalis* - <https://www.universalis.fr/encyclopedie/seisme-du-sichuan/>, accessed 29 July 2022, or the website *Encyclopedia Britannica* - <https://www.britannica.com/place/China>, accessed 9 March 2023).



**FIG. 1 – China pavilion of Expo 2010**

Photo: L. Wang; source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:China\\_Pavilion\\_of\\_Expo\\_2010.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:China_Pavilion_of_Expo_2010.jpg), CC BY-SA 2.0 license

13. The time that follows has already arrived. The grandson's marriage is celebrated under the night sky illuminated by fireworks. It is a western-style ceremony, with the white dress, the veil and the wedding ring. The scenery is that of the immense buildings of the Chinese metropolises. The spectacle of modernity is now gripping; the tempo of the orchestral music accelerates as the image of an arrivals-and-departures board similar to those in airports appears on the three screens. The names of Chinese cities linked with dates are displayed at a frantic pace, amid the swift clatter of the mechanical board's panels, which give a sense of the frenzy of time. Now the old man is sitting on an open-top bus discovering Shanghai; past and present media images accompany his discovery. His wonder-filled face is replaced by the serene faces of his grandson and his wife. A baby is on the way; he is the "great-grandson" (*chongsun* 重孙). The complete family picture appears: the infant babbles in the arms of his great-grandfather, under the amused eyes of his ageing grandparents and his young parents. "He symbolises the future hope of an ancient, great civilisation." To the sound of triumphant music, the film ends showing the Shanghai of 2010. Then the city transforms. The horizon of the metropolis of the future appears behind the mist, recalling what the son had admired thirty years earlier. The city of the future will be in harmony with nature—lush vegetation, the adjoining sea, and the flight of the birds.
14. This film provoked strong emotion in the audience, particularly during the earthquake rescue scene—a few were fighting back tears, while others stood up and thanked the soldiers.<sup>18</sup> It must be said that a few minutes earlier, viewers had been prepared to *admire* China's economic, urban and industrial development through their reading of slogans linked with images praising the improvement of their lives. In the hubbub of the crowd, it was possible to distinctly hear visitors congratulating themselves on the qualities that the Chinese needed to possess in order to arrive there: "the Chinese are very strong" (*Zhongguoren hen lihai* 中国人很厉害). The narrative presentation of *fazhan* through the harmonious succession of four generations quite skilfully played on many people having seen an improvement in the material conditions of their lives compared with those of their parents and grandparents. Constructed in the form of an allegory of generational and familial transmission, this fictional film integrated the elementary foundations of official history into a life experience that was metaphorical enough for everyone to appropriate. The repetition of key dates was one example. This film furthermore singularised the history of urbanisation in the context of Chinese civilisation, at several moments evoking "tradition", "ancestral wisdom" and "family values", which had been preserved despite sociological changes.
15. This state venture into "education about the past" was particularly effective in the space-time of Expo 2010, the first Expo ever to be held in China. The research group directed by Brigitte Bapandier and Sophie Houdart gave an account of this incredible deployment of modernity, through a mosaic of ethnographies that, based on different aspects of the event, showed how the Chinese state was able to produce a large-scale machinery capable of disseminating, both inside and outside the country,

18. This attitude was also observed by Aurélie Névoit (2014: 123).

a “modernist pact” situating the centre of the world in Shanghai, and more broadly in China.<sup>19</sup> With this “mega-event”, the state pursued two aims: to give the world a demonstration of China’s place on the international stage, one capable of conveying an international theme (that of the ecological city), and to firmly establish the political strategy implemented by Hu Jintao, creating “homo harmonicus”, the result of a utopian ideal, that of the “civilised” and “patriotic” Chinese citizen (Boutonnet, 2009). Judging by the reaction of the Chinese audience in the film theatre, this approach seems to have been particularly effective. In any case, it was reinforced again upon exiting the screening, by the room that the audience was forced to pass through in order to continue their visit of the China pavilion. This space was dedicated to the theme of “reminiscence” (*suiyue huimou* 岁月回眸). It presented a succession of four life-sized reconstructions of houses from different eras: 1978, 1988, 1998 and 2008, like film sets (*changjing* 场景).<sup>20</sup> Closely contemplating true-to-life dwellings with objects and family photos typical of each era caused everyone to recall periods of their own life, or those that their parents or grandparent had experienced, just as Proust’s madeleines did. The contrasting of eras added to the dizzying effect of the film, in the hindsight that was possible with regard to the “path travelled”.



**FIG. 2 – Three decades of Chinese living rooms. The China pavilion’s “Reminiscence” exhibition area**

Photo: F. Schneider, 2010; CC BY-NC 4.0 license

### **Perpetuating a celebration that is already over, or how to create an eternal present**

16. Although in China, the construction of narratives about changes must be consistent with the ideological strategies of a state eager to ensure its own preservation, conceptions of past, present and future time are obviously not exclusively developed in the arcana of the Party on the occasion of major national and international events. They are also at play in contemporary ways of producing heritage, particularly intangible cultural heritage (ICH).
17. It is undeniable that for several decades, China has been carrying out a voluntarist policy—with targets in precise figures—that has led to the creation, throughout the country, of museums and institutions whose purpose is to safeguard buildings and valorise cultural practices (Trémon, 2012). These very active heritage creation ventures serve two purposes: first, the political construction of the Chinese nation, particularly by looking back at a past perceived as glorious, and second, the positioning of China on the international stage according to a soft power logic (Bodolec and Obringer, 2020).<sup>21</sup> The

19. The aims of this group research were as follows: each ethnologist had to observe one aspect of the exhibition in light of their area of greatest interest, within the timeframes that best suited them. The intention of these ten very different ethnographies from one same place was to bring back “a kaleidoscopic image of that moment of universalism” (BAPTANDIER and HOUDART, 2015: 9).

20. These home interiors are reminiscent of time capsules as defined by Michèle COQUET (2018), those that, when unearthed, give us a glimpse into the world of those who buried them.

21. Remember that China has been a signatory of the Unesco convention since 1985, and actively participated in safeguarding ICH after the famous 2003 convention.

appearance of the category “intangible cultural heritage” (*feiwuzhi wenhua yichan* 非物质文化遗产) resulted from harmony between Unesco’s agenda and strictly Chinese cultural projects in the early 2000s. Talk of cultural recognition, regulations, and the definition of notions, was founded on a process already in progress based on a policy in place since 1949, of inventorying cultural practices, originally with an evolutionist aim of classification in order distinguish the Han from national minorities that were then regarded as embodiments of primitivity, and then in a spirit of post-Cultural Revolution reconstruction with the publication, begun in the 1980s, of *Collections of Works of Art and of Ethnic and Folk Literatures* (*Zhongguo minzu minjian wenyi jicheng zhi* 中国民族民间文艺集成志) (*ibid.*: 3).<sup>22</sup> The machinery that has since been implemented to produce a nationally and internationally recognised intangible heritage mobilises a network of human resources—local culture officials as well as experts (folklorists, museologists, researchers)—and the use of a manual, which since 2005 has made it possible, at the China level, to harmonise ways of conceiving and making ICH, thus operationalising selection and candidacy logics in relation to international bodies (*ibid.*: 5–8). We should add that all of this has contributed to local actions promoting the development of domestic tourism.

18. In China, as elsewhere in the world, the notion of ICH has produced a genuine shift in temporal logic: heritage is no longer a vestige to preserve before time erases it forever (“monuments make ruins”, as Daniel Fabre said), but rather a *living, dynamic, constantly recreated* thing that must be *transmitted to future generations* (Bortolotto, 2011). This patrimonial turn involved a fundamental change in the relationship with time. As Jean-Louis Tornatore writes,

if time, i.e. the flight of time and how to adapt to it, is the usual context for the exercise of heritage, now the perspective (the reason for one’s anxiety) is changing direction: the object of the loss, whose presence must be ensured, is not just behind us, it is also in front of us, it is forthcoming. The loss is not in need of be sorting/settling, but is rather to be anticipated—probably because it is approaching wearing the now-insistent face of catastrophe” (2017: §17).

In the author’s description, the catastrophe takes on the appearance of the current and future ecological crisis, provoking fear of the disappearance of living things as humanity knows them. This being the case, in order to combat the inevitable or probable future, the solution is to safeguard the present time, to conserve elements of our world. It is in this sense that the patrimonial paradigm has become a “thought of heritage”, simultaneously encompassing the works of the past and what we share of the contemporary. Daniel Fabre amused himself describing this reversal by taking up the paradox of Theseus in his own way. At the dawn of heritage, he wrote, the paradox could be resolved by rebuilding the boat, plank by plank, within a museum dedicated to conserving that which is old. With the appearance of ICH, it is no longer necessary to cling to the original object. The paradox can be resolved as soon as the shipwrights, “keepers of the tradition of naval construction from the time when the Ship of Theseus was sailing”, are there to rebuild the object (2016: 54). In short, there is no need to conserve the object as long as one knows how to perpetuate the know-how.

19. Thus ICH no longer places individuals in a historical or memory-based relationship with anteriority, instead producing “an *experiential* relationship to the past” (*ibid.*: 55, our emphasis). The past is no longer to be viewed as a bygone time, a *fixed object*, but rather as a resource that individuals mobilise to produce their “heritage story”, applying present logics to their relationship with passing time, with a loss to be anticipated, and with a heritage to be constituted. In China, the heritage story is often subject to experimentation that is somewhat nostalgic, fantasising about the authenticity of Chinese culture’s remarkable past.<sup>23</sup> Disappearance is no longer to be feared as in the Maoist period. It is quite simply driven away by all of the undertakings that freeze present time in spectacles and other public demonstrations of those immaterial objects. That past “constitutes the sanitised scenery in which inhabitants of the empire of the present Eternal can amuse themselves and fill with wonder” (Lauwaert, 2012: 61), even though the patrimonial undertaking paradoxically leads to *conserving a festival that has nevertheless already disappeared*, as was the case on the field site of Stéphane Gros, an ethnologist who specialises in the Drung minority inhabiting the mountainous fringes along the borders of Tibet and Burma.
20. In “An Obligation to Party” (2012), Stéphane Gros recounts that in the early 2000s, a project to resume celebrating the Kaquewa festival (the New Year ritual, *kraltshang-wa* in Drung language) was launched in the village of Dizhengdang. The festival had been banned in 1966 at the dawn of the Cultural Revolution, and had never again been celebrated aside from a few rare occasions in the 1990s in certain villages of the northern valley, after it had received official recognition in 1991; but it had ended up

22. These inventorying policies are not dissimilar to older collection practices that resulted in the compilation of *annals* (*difangzhi* 地方志) that can be considered, to use Brigitte BAPTANDIER’s terms, a kind of “proto-ethnology” (2010: 220).

23. This could be a case of what Caroline Bodolec describes as the “atmosphere of gentle nostalgia” that reigns in the patrimonialised villages of Xiaocheng and Nianpan, or in the museum and hotel set up in ancient *yaodong* 窑洞 ensembles—vaulted troglodyte dwellings of the same region (in Shaanxi): “Tourists are encouraged to project themselves into a universe frozen in time, a bygone era whose rurality has fortunately been preserved in this little corner of Shaanbei where they can find the roots of an eternal China. As Tim Oakes astutely demonstrated, this discourse contributes to the construction of modernity, to acceptance of hectic city life, since it is possible to rediscover preserved, serene spaces somewhere, for as long as holidays last [OAKES, 2000: 674–675]” (BODOLEC, 202: 63). The ecomuseums studied by William NITZKY stem from this same semiotics (2012). By contrast, the film *The Road to Our Beautiful Life* (mentioned above) sought to provoke a stronger nostalgia effect.

disappearing. Not without difficulty, this new push for revival was led by a Party secretary who wanted to promote the cultural specificities of the Drung at a time when tourism in the region was undergoing a relatively attractive development. Discussions in village assemblies revealed fears of doing it wrong. After such a long interruption, much of the knowledge and know-how had disappeared. Reluctance to revive the festival was coupled with the fear that the ritual would lack orthopraxy—something that would have represented a danger for the whole village community—and there was an even more pragmatic worry, that of a poor return on an economic investment that was too big.

21. After negotiations between the inhabitants and the village authorities, the festival was finally celebrated, but this was to be short-lived; the festival disappeared again after only three editions. The first two were celebrated under the banner of “tradition” and respect for an orthodox organisation of the ritual, with divinatory sessions, incantations and dances to receive the blessing of the spirits. All of this was led by the oldest inhabitants. The third festival in 2003 was developed by the village’s young people. The ritual framework was preserved, but new practices were added, like the dressing and decoration of a tree that was supposed to express unity and solidarity among the villagers, and the organisation of a big picnic that almost took on an carnivalesque atmosphere with the appearance of Drung youths in costumes. In the view of Stéphane Gros, the first celebrations resulted from a search for ritual authenticity, whereas the last one sought to synthesise inherited know-how with updated ways of asserting identity. This format was not resistant to time; the festival became “a pale copy [of the ritual], a folklorised version emptied of its content”. The ethnologist concluded: “As a simply contemporary and purely playful form of a vague cultural referent, the festival is no longer anything but an emblem” (Gros, 2012: 39). As the author writes, the patrimonialisation of the Kaqewa festival could have been simply an effect of writing, just one more item on the ICH list, further to the first patrimonial recognition given in 1991 and confirming it, but it drew reactions from villagers. The opportunity to produce their own *patrimonial story*, through the Party secretary, seemed to lead the villagers to want to experience their “distant” past. But the original ritual had already passed away. The festival consequently looked like an empty shell that the youths’ inventions did not succeed in filling.
22. It seems to us that the failure to perpetuate the festival could be explained by the overlong break in the transmission of know-how (despite the presence of the oldest inhabitants), but this usually does not constitute an insurmountable problem in China. The relationship to the authentic thing leaves the door open to reconstructions (of temples for example) and reinventions, as long as the effectiveness of the sites and rituals is ensured. The illusion of the Kaqewa festival created by the patrimonial venture could have been sustained if the *kraltshang-wa* ritual had continued to have meaning for villagers and in their community life, but the socioeconomic reconfigurations of recent decades had permanently changed the place given to that ritual. To refer again to Daniel Fabre’s words quoted above, it is as if shipwrights of today had succeeded—despite not totally knowing how to identically reproduce the know-how of the past—in building an extraordinary ship that would be considered “authentically” similar to the original, except for the nuance that once placed in the water, it would not float. Such a ship would no longer be of use to anyone. How could anyone recognise in this the Ship of Theseus that had been capable of braving tumultuous waves to bring the heroes all the way back to Athens? How would it still be possible to recognise in the present object the qualities and effectiveness of the past one? Thus the Drung’s festival, as a living tradition, is no more. Labelled as heritage, it nevertheless remains, but is now beyond changing, frozen in the “eternal present” like the ship lying at the bottom of the water. Like many other patrimonialised objects, it has become an element of the territory marked as “China’s ancient culture”.

### **Returning to see the past without being seen: the imagination of times**

23. This “eternal present” is a useful temporal regime for rethinking past and future heritage. It tells of changes by strongly mobilising the imagination. When the metro station appeared on the Nanjing map even though it had not yet been built, it did not represent a mapped reality, but rather gave substance to the imagination of Chinese modernity. One experienced this in a universe of possibilities that will become concrete: the station would ultimately be built, and only the future will be able to tell us if Shanghai will become that city full of luxuriant vegetation shown in the China pavilion. This way of conceiving what lies ahead is not far from the literary and visual science-fiction genre, which is sometimes presented as the “art of anticipation”. Released only three years after Expo 2010, Vivian Qu’s film *Trap Street* follows the adventures of young cartographer Li Qiuming, who is responsible for surveying the streets of Nanjing to establish their GPS coordinates. Qiuming falls in love with a young woman he meets by chance. Trying to get to know her, he follows her through the city and soon discovers that she works on a street that is not mapped anywhere. One might say that although it is quite real, the street does not exist *officially*. Thus begins a story in which something strange leads not to something supernatural, but rather to the revelation of a secret, of which the viewer glimpses only a few aspects: the mystery is connected with a political organisation and the surveillance of inhabitants.<sup>24</sup>

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24. The film is of course not categorised as science-fiction, but it plays with some of the codes of fantasy, particularly in the starting point of a situation about which one never succeeds in finding out how real it is, causing one reviewer to write that the love story turns into a Kafkaesque drama. See the review “Le cauchemar est au bout de la rue” published in *Le Monde* on 13 August

Obviously, the maps of Nanjing call to mind both the filmmaker of the strange, and the ethnographer. This observation suggests that a “mutual permeation pact”, as Pierre Déléage and Emmanuel Grimaud have called it, could be built between anthropology and science fiction, since they share the same aim: to “construct the plausibility of off-kilter worlds, operating on motivations that are alternative to our own”. Both attempt to understand how their subjects view the realities they experience (2019: 7). The metamorphoses of the world are also tested in the imaginary world of science fiction stories that offer a more or less off-kilter version of them, and these stories sometimes even become reality a few decades later (*ibid.*: 22).

24. In China, science fiction—the descendant of utopia and of its corollary, dystopia—is eminently political. Appearing at the end of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1912), the contours of utopianism took shape in the early twentieth century with a whole generation of reformers and revolutionaries.<sup>25</sup> Thus Chinese science fiction “was instituted as mainly a utopian narrative that projected the political desire for China’s reform into an idealized, technologically more advanced world.” (Song, 2015: 7). It declined with the golden age of political utopia during the republican period of the 1920s and 1930s and the Maoist regime that followed. This was because “the utopian future no longer needed imagination to access it, as social reality itself was pregnant with the future: *the separation between the utopia and the reality had to be scaled with power but not imagination*” according to Henry Y. H. Zhao (quoted by Wang and Song, 2015: 3, our emphasis). Post-Maoism subsequently constituted a real turning point in the literary genre, which underwent periods of revival and prohibition (Gaffric, 2017). In the view of Wang Chaohua and Song Mingwei, 1989 was a particularly significant year. They see in the brutal repression of the student movement a “collapse of political idealism” (Wang and Song, 2015: 5). This gave rise not only to works of dystopian fiction,<sup>26</sup> but also to “a pervasive cynicism and political apathy” in a period marked by “rapid economic development, high-level marketisation in all social domains, and devaluation of intellectual interventions in social reality” (*ibid.*).
25. After the 1990s, the new paradigm of science fiction imagination resulted from what Song Mingwei calls “the new wave of Chinese sci-fi”, whose major themes explore “the myth of China’s high-speed development”: he writes that “[...] prosperity begets apocalypse; the utopian vision of China’s ascendency to a superpower as promoted by the government has often been shown with nightmarish and inhuman social and ethical effects” (Song, 2015: 8). However, this observation needs to be qualified in light of the recent blockbuster-film adaptation of a novella by Liu Cixin, a major internationally known sci-fi author elevated to the rank of Isaac Asimov. Released in 2019 and streamed on Netflix, the film *The Wandering Earth* was presented as marking a new era for Chinese science fiction cinema (Kerlan, 2021: 222). Directed by Frant Gwo in style much inspired by Hollywood, with financing from the Chinese government, it recounts the centuries-long process of saving planet Earth from the expanding sun, which is turning into a red giant. What the film presents is “not a hero, much less a superhero, but rather a group of characters of all ages, mostly men, all Chinese of course, prepared to sacrifice themselves out of love for humanity” (*ibid.*: 224). This is not a pessimistic story. The director appropriated the science fiction narrative form with a specific goal: to “illustrate the values that are considered ‘socialist’ in China today” (*ibid.*: 222). In so doing, he contributed to the soft power strategies being implemented by the Chinese government on the international stage.<sup>27</sup> Shanghai’s internationally recognised skyline appears on the film poster.<sup>28</sup> It is not immersed in harmonious, evolving nature as in the film *The Road to Our Beautiful Life* at Expo 2010. Instead, its outline appears in the clouds, under the huge spatial infrastructure that will ensure the rescue of all of humanity.

Ce média ne peut-être affiché ici, mais vous pouvez le consulter en ligne :  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0TDII5IkI3Y>

### VIDÉO 1 – Trailer for the film *The Wandering Earth*

26. After more than a century in existence, Chinese science fiction is still linked to politics, whether mobilised to condemn sudden changes in society or to present China as a leading world power. In both cases, it brings order to the metamorphoses of the social in the realm of the imagination. The novella *The Man Who Ended History*, by Chinese-American author Ken Liu, similarly inspires us to think about

2014 ([https://www.lemonde.fr/culture/article/2014/08/12/trap-street-le-cauchemar-est-au-bout-de-la-rue\\_4470260\\_3246.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/culture/article/2014/08/12/trap-street-le-cauchemar-est-au-bout-de-la-rue_4470260_3246.html), accessed 14 May 2021).

25. The vast majority of early science fiction was based on translations of Western or Japanese works, at the time when Western scientific knowledge was being introduced into China. The influence of this knowledge played a key role in the development of that new literary genre, which was initially called the “scientific novel” (*kexue xiaoshuo* 科学小说), before becoming “scientific imaginative fiction” (*kexue huanxiang xiaoshuo* 科学幻想小说) in 1949 under the Soviet influence. The word used today for “science fiction” is the contraction of the Chinese characters in *kehuan* 科幻 (ALOISIO, 2017: §12).

26. However, there are dystopian stories predating that era, for example *Cat Country* by Lao She, published in 1932, a satire of China, then threatened by the Japanese invasion and incapable of overcoming internal divisions.

27. Although Frant Gwo’s statements circulated in the media leave almost no doubt as to his link with the current Chinese government, Liu Cixin’s position relative to the regime’s ideological project seems less clear (GAFFRIC, 2017).

28. The poster can be seen on the website of the *China Global Television Network*: <https://news.cgtn.com/news/3d3d3414f7a63544e32457a6333566d54/index.html>, accessed 8 February 2023.

changes in society, not only by telling of a different world, but also by including in the story a reflection on time.<sup>29</sup> In the form of a documentary film script, it recounts a historical controversy arising from the invention of a time machine. The journey enables individuals to relive the past, but without the body being physically sent into a temporal vortex. Only the mind travels; the traveller is therefore not visible to the men and women of the past. This amazing invention created by Japanese-American physicist Akemi Kirino nevertheless presents a major problem: *the technology destroys time*. This is because time travel to a precise location and moment is allowed only once, because “the Bohm-Kirino particles [that make time travel possible] are gone and no one can ever go back there again” (Liu, 2011: 131). Thus: “The Kirino Process requires a leap of faith: those who have witnessed the ineffable have no doubt of its existence, but that clarity is incapable of being replicated for anyone else” (*ibid.*: 154).

27. This limitation is not the only subject of debate in Ken Liu’s fictional story. It begins by exploring a terrible event in the history of the Sino-Japanese conflicts during the Second World War: Unit 731, “Asia’s Auschwitz”. Built in the province of Manchukuo, it was a camp in which soldiers of the Imperial Japanese Army conducted experiments on the bodies of male and female Chinese prisoners, involving vivisections, amputations, and the inoculation of diseases. But lifting the veil on what really happened is not without repercussions, as the sci-fi novella shows. It recounts how the choice of that tragedy was heatedly discussed on the international diplomatic stage, with Japan being accused of not wanting to recognise the atrocities it had committed, Communist China being suspected of instrumentalising history for political purposes, and the United States having kept silent about Unit 731 long after the end of the global conflict. The inventors of the Kirino Process aimed to make time travel possible for people, but not historians or even journalists, but rather relatives and descendants of the victims of Unit 731. Their stories were supposed to generate the empathy and emotion that were so much lacking from the history offered by academics. As is written in the novella, that highly consequential decision was advocated by the main character Evan Wei, a Chinese-American historian of Classical Japan, and the husband of physicist Akemi Kirino. This historical controversy generated by time travel was thus based on the conception of history as *narrative*, as advocated by Evan Wei: history must cut a path based on individual accounts. To bring the past “alive”—*putting it in the present tense and the present time*—it had to be “felt”; in short, one had to undergo an “emotional experience of the past”. This was the project’s point of departure.
28. The documentary (in Ken Liu’s novella) gives voice to professor Akemi Kirino, to historians, to political figures, to time-travellers, and to former Japanese guards of Unit 731 who are still alive, as well as to people on the street (through several brief opinions given here and there). Reading their words, Evan Wei’s fatal destiny is easy enough to guess. Assailed by criticism of every kind, bogged down by his complex conception of the evolution of historical research thanks to the Kirino Process, he takes his own life by throwing himself under a Boston subway train. Not long before, an international discussion of the validity and use of the time travel machine had led to the signing of a *Comprehensive Time Travel Moratorium*, halting the experiments. Thus concludes Ken Liu’s story.
29. Born in China, Ken Liu is not only a recognised writer, and the author of essays on the science fiction genre, but he is also one of the leading translators of Chinese science fiction, characterised in one article as “the man bringing Chinese science fiction to the West”.<sup>30</sup> Encouraging us to get beyond a purely culturalist or overly political interpretation of the genre, he believes that the themes dealt with in Chinese science fiction stories are in fact universal. “People’s lives tend to be dominated by the same considerations... petty bureaucracy, how to make a living, how to give your children a good education... *how to adjust to a radically changing society*”.<sup>31</sup> All of this is what both Chinese and Western sci-fi speaks about. Beyond the author’s intentions, it is quite remarkable to observe the transnational exchanges that are giving shape to today’s Chinese science fiction genre: Ken Liu translates the work of Chinese author Xia Jia into English, while she translates Ken Liu’s writings into Chinese. The bridge to the visual arts is not hard to cross: Ken Liu is currently a consultant for Netflix alongside Liu Cixin, whose major work, which he translated, has been adapted into a series.<sup>32</sup> One can therefore understand the importance of science fiction to Xi Jinping’s government: particularly globalised since Liu Cixin’s worldwide success (with his trilogy *The Three-Body Problem*), sci-fi is a formidable tool for creating a large-scale embodiment of the main ideology of the “Chinese dream” (Gaffric, 2017: §34).

29. The novella was first published in English as *The Man Who Ended History: A Documentary* in 2011, then in Chinese in 2013 (*Dang xiri zhi guang yunluo* 当昔日之光陨落, which could simply be translated as “the disappearance of the past”), translated by Xia Jia, who is presented as embodying the new generation of Chinese sci-fi writers, in addition to being an academic specialising in Chinese literature. The French translation was published in 2016.

30. See the press article “Meet the Man Bringing Chinese Science Fiction to the West” published in *Newsweek*, 30 October 2016 (<https://www.newsweek.com/man-bringing-chinese-science-fiction-west-514893>, accessed 14 May 2021).

31. *Ibid.* Ken Liu’s words echo the argument he put forward in his short essay “China Dreams: Contemporary Chinese Science Fiction”, published in the science fiction magazine *Clarkesworld* in December 2014 ([http://clarkesworldmagazine.com/liu\\_12\\_14/](http://clarkesworldmagazine.com/liu_12_14/), accessed 14 May 2021).

32. On the adaptation of Liu Cixin’s work “The Three-Body Problem”, presented as an “apocalyptic space opera”, see the press article “L’adaptation périlleuse d’un monument de SF chinoise en série Netflix” published in *Le Monde* on 31 January 2021 ([https://www.lemonde.fr/pixels/article/2021/01/31/l-adaptation-perilleuse-d-un-monument-de-sf-chinoise-en-serie-netflix\\_6068241\\_4408996.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/pixels/article/2021/01/31/l-adaptation-perilleuse-d-un-monument-de-sf-chinoise-en-serie-netflix_6068241_4408996.html) [https://www.lemonde.fr/pixels/article/2021/01/31/l-adaptation-perilleuse-d-un-monument-de-sf-chinoise-en-serie-netflix\\_6068241\\_4408996.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/pixels/article/2021/01/31/l-adaptation-perilleuse-d-un-monument-de-sf-chinoise-en-serie-netflix_6068241_4408996.html), accessed 14 May 2021).

30. In *The Man Who Ended History*, Ken Liu skilfully presents a controversy about memory issues, in order to question the legitimacy of ways of writing about the past, through a plot as big as the planet. The story unfolds in a fictional-*science* world that is only slightly out of sync with reality. It takes place in a present time (or near-future) that is similar to our own and, with the exception of the Bohm-Kirino particles that enable humans to travel through time, everything seems plausible. Unit 731 really did exist between 1936 and 1945, as did the debates of historians and politicians opposing the Japanese and Chinese governments.<sup>33</sup> Taking a science fiction author's approach, Ken Liu's point of departure is an extraordinary fact: *the confusion of temporal regimes*. As the main character Evan Wei says: "But we have now come to the end of history. What my wife and I have done is to take narrative away, and to give us all a chance to see the past with our own eyes. In place of memory, we now have incontrovertible evidence" (Liu, 2011: 152). Therefore, the documentary story of the experiment that was "really" conducted becomes the story of imaginations shaken by the possibilities offered by the machine. The official history of nations has imposed order on the century's changes, producing transitional narratives of the post-war period—"official history"—that are now challenged by the accounts of time-traveller witnesses.
31. *The Man Who Ended History* is a *mise en abyme* that echoes the questions raised by the first Chinese sci-fi texts: what future are we building as a nation (in a now-globalised world)? This echo is perhaps due to the fact that in China, sci-fi's original anticipatory intention—to imagine the possibilities of an action as if it had already been carried out—is quite uniquely compatible with certain aspects of the exercise of politics, which tend to prefer the story of an anticipatable future over the description of present facts. This is the thesis that Jean-Yves Heurtebise has put forward to explain the close relationship between the relatively recent revival of Chinese sci-fi literature, which produces alternative worlds, and the rulers' systematic resort to futurist stories to establish a basis for China's national power.<sup>34</sup> Between the skyline of the ecological city promised by Expo 2010 and the prospect of a metropolis destined to wander through the solar system in *The Wandering Earth*, there might not be a great distance to cross... But beyond everything at play in the production of science fiction, beyond efforts to write or rewrite official history, beyond the complex elaboration of patrimonial discourse, the fundamental question remains that of the making of future worlds, which shapes the collective experience of change. Does imagining the future not mean reordering the temporal regimes of the past, present and future in such a way that they are collectively experienced as such? Although identifying that which is of the order of changes is relatively easy—all the more so when they take place in relatively short spans of time—the characterisation of the change, its very essence, seems to more easily elude attempts at objectivisation. What makes change? In the case of China, with the credo of *fazhan*—a "development" that plays on the "eternal present" and likes to instrumentalise a continuity lasting thousands of years—the attempt appears to be even more complicated: so where is the tipping point causing individuals (including ethnologists) to experience a feeling of breaking with present (and past) time? And for observers of Chinese society, how is it possible to understand it in anthropological terms?

## Ethnologists' zero-point of observation

32. Different types of story like those evoked above—whether they reflect how people make light of the changes they are undergoing or those they anticipate in time—enable the ethnologist to understand certain perceptions of the changes in progress, and also make sense of their own experience of the evolutions on-site. But as Paul Ricœur writes, *time "overtakes" the story*; time does not so easily allow itself to be enclosed in our narrative forms. Consequently, beyond those narrativizations, how can temporal experiences be studied from an anthropological perspective? The other aim of this issue of *Ateliers d'anthropologie* is to consider which aspects of social change can be approached through ethnologists' experience of time, *alongside* or *with* their interlocutors, during fieldwork. Shining a light on this shared experience requires reflexive scrutiny of how ethnographic relationships are established—with people but also with places, events and objects—within multiple temporalities, to the point of itself becoming a way of indexing historical change.
33. As everyone knows, for ethnologists, going into the field and staying there for an extended period of time among people they are seeking to understand, is a constitutive dimension of their approach.<sup>35</sup> As Jean Copans explains (2011: 14), for them, the field becomes at one and the same time "a place, a

33. By way of conclusive notes, Ken Liu presented a short bibliography assembling a few books by historians on Unit 731. For a broader contextualisation, see Joanne Chern's senior thesis at Scripps College, Claremont, "Restoring, Rewriting, Reimagining: Asian American Science Fiction Writers and the Time Travel Narrative" (2014) ([https://scholarship.claremont.edu/scripps\\_theses/449/](https://scholarship.claremont.edu/scripps_theses/449/), accessed 14 May 2021).

34. In his contribution to the issue of *Monde chinois* dedicated to sci-fi, Jean-Yves HEURTEBISE shows the structural analogy between science fiction literature and political practice, which share a consubstantially oracular trait in China. Sci-fi stories are oracular in that they are presented as an anticipation of a possible future. As for the divinatory aspect of politics (understood here as the set of discursive tools used in the exercise of power), it comes from the mechanics of Chinese writing, originally included in divinatory operations, and used since ancient times as an effective tool for governing (2017).

35. Among ethnologists, *going* into the field—and, as goes hand-in-hand with this, *building* the field (as the research subject is called)—necessarily implies a long-term empirical investment, and all that this entails such as being based less on occasional "interviews" than on often informal day-to-day "conversations".

type of practice and behaviour (both social and scientific), a subject or more broadly an area made into a theme, and finally a scientific tradition, indeed a rite of entry into the profession".<sup>36</sup> If a long-term field study usually marks the beginning of their intellectual journey (and their career), what is ethnologists' later relationship with the field site over time? Whereas in the moment, they usually see this initial field site as the whole thing, with hindsight it is sometimes later regarded as the mere beginning of ongoing ethnographic research. In the case of successive visits, the first field inquiry becomes a kind of "zero point of observation",<sup>37</sup> corresponding to an era, but also to a given moment in a researcher's personal trajectory. The field site changes, sometimes at a dazzling speed, and so inevitably do the ethnologists.

### Observing our observations: three ways of doing fieldwork

34. There are field studies that ethnologists do all in one go, by immersing themselves in a given society for months at a time, or sometimes years. In other cases, the field site is revisited much later. In still other instances, returns to the field site are more frequent, even regular; one can then speak of "long-term fieldwork". In the second and third cases, former observations become reference points for those that follow, even though they were not initially made with that aim.
35. *The first case* long characterised ethnographic practice. In the introduction to the French version of *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, André Devyver wrote:

During a stay of more than two years, [Bronislaw Malinowski] spent only three weeks with the Europeans who lived there, and this enabled him to get accepted by the native Trobriand people and understand their mentality. All of his later publications benefited from this heroic depersonalisation effort, and in relation to those texts, almost all of the ethnographic works of the time seemed lack depth and colour (1963: 9).

One might add that in a troubling way, his *Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term*—whose posthumous publication was notoriously controversial—draws back the curtain on the underside of that "heroic depersonalisation effort" and the problem inherent in his intention, "to feel that [he] was truly in touch with the natives" (Malinowski, [1922] 2002: 6), in other words to "integrate native behaviour into native significance" (1935: 86, quoted by Fabbiano, 2008: §14). Those long missions, which in the early days of ethnology looked like veritable expeditions (alone or in a team, sometimes with family), implied taking the time necessary to get to know the other, in their own thought frameworks, and subsequently to forget oneself a bit. In the past, travel was not what it is today, and an onerous, challenging journey of several days was needed to reach the study site. In the case of China, in addition to journeys of several consecutive days and nights by train or bus to get to the countryside from the capital or from another of the large cities where one could arrive from France, up until the mid-1990s special authorisations had to be obtained to stay in "zones prohibited" to foreigners (*bukaifang* 不开放).

36. Long field studies imply also—and perhaps above all—leaving them: the very definition of "ethnographic field site" contains the idea that "leaving the field" is the way to remain an anthropologist, as Michel Agier reminds us (2004: 47). Staying there would mean taking the risk of losing the distance needed for observation, of lessening one's reflexivity, or of substituting one's own subjectivity for that of one's interlocutors, providing that it is possible to step through the looking-glass of alterity. Ethnologists usually do not adopt the principle of "corpus saturation"<sup>38</sup> that signals the end of research in other social sciences (particularly sociology and linguistics), denoting the time when the researcher is obtaining hardly any more new information. This approach is closely connected with the concept of "representativeness". In almost complete contrast, unexpected discoveries in the field—"serendipity"—can direct ethnologists' research, producing that special type of knowledge, "delivered *from inside* a social world understood at a microscopic scale", to borrow Gérard Althabe's expression (1990: 126), and in this sense, the field of observational possibilities seems infinite. That said, even if one believes it is necessary to stay on the field site for at least a year to observe the cycle of seasons and festivals,<sup>39</sup> in any case there also comes a point (one that is less tangible and difficult to explain) when

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36. Remember that the term "field site" is sometimes lends itself to misunderstanding because it is not solely used by ethnologists, but has a special meaning for them, different from that which it is given by historians, sociologists, linguists, geographers and philologists who also speak of "going to a field site" (often when their research concerns faraway societies) to make reference to other forms of data collection (from archives, or from a site during short stays, or by using a quantitative method)—even if they borrow or take inspiration from ethnology, and ethnologists reciprocally borrow their perspective and methods just as often.

37. See Adeline Herrou's definition of this term (this issue, note 23).

38. A collection of interviews is considered saturated when the same answers are always (or almost always) being obtained, and new data is no longer being gathered.

39. One year is the minimum duration recommended, in old ethnography manuals like the one by Marcel MAUSS, who believed that "no good sociological enquiry can last less than one year" (1947: 13), and in the teachings of many professors of ethnology, like Olivier Herrenschmidt and Georges Condominas. Although this duration prescription can seem dated now that today's societies, such as in China, no longer make much use of the traditional agricultural calendar, it nevertheless continues to be the norm for long field studies, making it possible to observe activity variations over the course of the months. But in the view of some ethnologists, the cycle that should be taken into account is different. For example, the Sai-kan procession in Taiwan (an inter-community ritual that is part of a broader festival that includes a "visit" to the gods of epidemics and other collective rituals, like a Daoist *jiao*) has been taking place every three years for over two centuries, and this is the temporality that was essential for Fiorella ALLIO when

the ethnography must be considered finished, even if some interlocutors struggle with the idea that the investigation could have come to an end, as in the case of Yamazaki Ikue who, long after the end of the investigation that had led her to tell her life story, regularly sent audio recordings to Laurence Caillet from Japan, in which she continued recounting fragments of her history in the same mode as that which the anthropologist had established during the anthropological work they had done together.<sup>40</sup>

37. *The second case*, that of the field site revisited after a long absence, oscillates between new fieldwork and a way of “refreshing” the data of the initial fieldwork. Inevitably, this venture either confirms the authors’ past intuitions, or encourages them to continue their reflection in different directions, regardless of whether they came with the conscious desire to reexplore the conclusions to which they had been led by the observations they had made in the earlier time. Ordinarily, it is by reading their field notebooks that ethnologists *re-reflect* on how their data enabled them draw general conclusions. This is what was shown by Éric Garine Wichatitsky in an approach “based on the scepticism that [he] as author of the interpretive text maintained with regard to [his] own work as ethnographer [... aiming to understand] the process by which ethnologists attribute to some observations the status of fact rather than anecdote” (2019: 5). Occasional returns to the field site can also provide an opportunity for another form of re-evaluation or perspective-shifting relative to the initial fieldwork: our point of view is necessarily affected by changing the mobilised theoretical framework. In the view of Michael Burawoy, because of this change, the return visit engages one in a reflexive ethnology (2010). More generally, since the ethnographic account is very often written at a time later than the moment of observation, the retrospective reconstruction engages the ethnologist in a specific relationship with passing time. The possibility of updating brings even more complexity to this relationship between the time of the narrative and the time of the fieldwork. The desire to renew the experience is explained just as much by the desire to continue as by wanting to know what subsequently happened (and maybe discover an outcome different from the one envisioned—a second end), such that the desire to return is strong enough to overcome the worry that the magic will be gone or different. When Francis Affergan returned to Martinique thirty years after the stay that led him to write a first monograph (1983), he described “that collision between the belief in having already seen and the strangeness of the first time”, suggesting that “in the case of a revisited field site, what we are dealing with is the strangeness of a society that has become unrecognisable to itself and to its observers: a strangeness that means both an initial familiarity and a disfigurement” (2015: 9–10). In other words, “[Francis Affergan] acknowledge[s] the strange feeling of finding a new field site, so to speak, yet one that does not contradict one’s earlier impressions” (Chanson, 2007: 242). Sometimes the “collision” is more brutal, producing a “veritable mental revolution”, as Claude Lévi-Strauss said of his own brief return to Brazil in 1985, forty-six years after having left it, observing that it had become “entirely, totally, a different country” and that ethnography would never again be that of societies born in complete isolation from our own, since “we are now in a regime of ‘mutual compenetration’”.<sup>41</sup> Even if the changes are radical, the collected data is not necessarily obsolete or out-of-date. Detailed analysis of what much later remains, and of what been metamorphosed (disfigured?), itself provides information on the developments.<sup>42</sup>
38. *The third case*, that of long-term fieldwork, also called “multitemporal fieldwork” (Howell and Talle, 2002: vii), facilitated by the development—and democratisation—of transportation and by the acceleration of globalisation, causes the diachronic dimension of history to be taken into account more in the resolutely synchronic perspective of ethnology. Return trips to the field site help researchers avoid the danger of describing distant populations in an eternal present. Revisiting the field site, with a different way of looking at it, sometimes makes it possible to solve the puzzle of a question that has long troubled one’s research.<sup>43</sup> But its aim is more generally to follow paths that have previously remained

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she chose that for her fieldwork (1998). But other indicators help with assessing if the time spent in the field is sufficient, such as the quantity of data recorded in our field notebooks, as suggested by Michael Houseman, who makes the general recommendation to PhD students that they have at least 1,000 pages of observation notes on what they saw or heard (not conceptual reflections on those observations) to be certain of being able to write a thesis (PhD students’ seminar at Paris-Nanterre University, 26 November 2020, and personal correspondence to Adeline Herrou).

40. Remarks made in the seminar “Domaine de l’Extrême-Orient” at Paris-Nanterre University (2008); see also CAILLET, 2010: 173–174.

41. Interview, “Claude Lévi-Strauss, grand témoin de l’Année du Brésil”, published in *Le Monde* 21 February 2005 ([https://www.le2monde.fr/culture/article/2005/02/21/claude-levi-strauss-grand-temoin-de-l-annee-du-bresil\\_398992\\_3246.html](https://www.le2monde.fr/culture/article/2005/02/21/claude-levi-strauss-grand-temoin-de-l-annee-du-bresil_398992_3246.html), accessed 15 May 2021). Valérie VANDENABEELE (2019) highlighted this regime in her research, by showing how Tibetans who found themselves inside Pudacuo National Park—created in Yunnan province on the initiative of an American NGO, in conjunction with Chinese political authorities—saw their lives profoundly changed by this development project, which began in the late 1990s. They were involved in activities that were new for them, such as renting out horses and selling “exotic” foods to tourists, like yak kebabs and butter tea, which they themselves secretly bought, having neither yaks nor *dri*. They have even developed a certain enthusiasm for these new practices, which are envied by many inhabitants of neighbouring villages that remained outside the park.

42. One ethnologist’s return visit to another ethnologist’s field site also makes it possible to bring out elements that are salient for understanding what is behind change (for example Matteo Gallo on the trail of Alban Bensa; GALLO, 2021: 260 *sqq.*), but this ethnologist is then limited to the data elaborated and published by their predecessor, or to the latter’s field notebooks, to which they less often have access (ZEITLYN, 2022: §33). By contrast, an ethnologist who revisits their own field site can resume their field notes, particularly those that remain unused.

43. A few years after completing his thesis and publishing the book (which might mark the completion of research more than the end of fieldwork), Gregory DELAPLACE, having returned to the field site, permitted himself a question “in a more roundabout tone than usual” to find out a truth that he suspected was different from the version he had previously been taught. The answer then counted “among the happiest ethnographic discoveries, and maybe the most beautiful that [he] was to make” (2020: 72): if there

unexplored. A new problem comes to light: how should one integrate social change and ongoing history into a study that, at first glance, examines something else entirely? And above all, how should one analyse “the uncanny” in something familiar—to borrow an expression Freud used in an article published in 1919 (Freud, 1971)—when this moves around from day to day in a singular way? What is to be made of when ethnologists return to their investigation sites and find then unrecognisable, sometimes not long after their last visit? Their own observations, reconsidered in light of the changes that have occurred, will then take on new meaning, if they endeavour to draw concrete clues (often extremely telling ones) from the change in progress, or simply from the time that is passing. The ethnologists of China assembled in this issue (and the one ethnologist of Nepal) have in common that they have revisited their respective field sites over the years.

## In China: more accessible and hyperconnected field sites

39. It makes particular sense to consider the question of the ethnologist’s “return to the field” in the case of China, given that Chinese society has changed much over the past forty years, but also because the practice of ethnology—particularly that of ethnography—has also undergone major changes there. After ethnology had been criticised and restricted during the Cultural Revolution period from 1966 to 1976 (as were most of the human and social sciences in the same period, characterised among other things as “bourgeois” according to communist terminology), it gradually found its place again during the 1980s, and from 1995, field investigations by Chinese and Western ethnologists were able to be conducted more easily, particularly thanks to the organisation of conferences once again promoting that academic discipline.<sup>44</sup> That same year, the situation of foreigners on Chinese soil improved, with the withdrawal of a currency that had been reserved for them, and the granting of access to regions of China from which they had been previously banned. Little by little, long-term fieldworks increased in number, almost becoming widespread, without ethnologists having necessarily supported the project at first. And a new generation of researchers was trained with fieldwork in continental China, whereas their predecessors had conducted their first studies in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, or among Chinese diasporas (during the 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s) before later being able to access the continent (this Brigitte Bapandier’s experience, as she recounts in this issue). Therefore, in the case of Chinese studies, the generation of researchers to which the ethnographer belongs has a specific importance: it indicates the era in which they knew China, what we have called their “zero-point of observation”.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, their view of Chinese society was shaped in contact (and comparison) with that of their predecessors, particularly their research supervisor, as suggested by Kristofer Schipper, who in France sees himself as the successor of Édouard Chavannes, Henri Maspero, and his thesis supervisor Max Kaltenmark.<sup>46</sup> While moving forward in a field of knowledge opened up by others, through their descriptions, the ethnologist updates the picture of a given society, and of the changes underway.
40. In her article, Brigitte Bapandier suggests that “[her] years of fieldwork show a ‘state of China’ that reveals a past time no less than an impermanent present” (this issue, §6). In light of the major transformations that have taken place in Chinese society over the past sixty years, what is in fact visible through researchers’ works are different “states of China”. Depending on the ethnologist’s generation and their subject of study, the measure of change is different. In particular, the works of those who knew the China of the 1980s and 1990s sometimes give a sense of the professional and intellectual disarray they experience, confronted with field sites that are changing completely. On this subject, Caroline Bodolec for example evokes a “feeling of perpetual surprise (even stupefaction)” whose effects on her own practice as an ethnologist she tries to assess (2021: 48). Still others approach the extreme changes from the angle of “irony”, like Mayfair Yang who, in 2010, noted the government’s involvement in the promotion of certain religious traditions: “The irony is sometimes painful; just the other day

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were so few residual bones in the mountains of Mongolia, this was not because of double funerals that had been hidden from him, but rather the presence of vultures. “This small detail not only made it possible to solve the mystery of the lack of human remains around the sites of tombs, but it was the key to understanding the Mongol funeral ideology as a whole, the missing piece from which its unity could be deduced” (*ibid.*).

44. Roberto MALIGHETTI looks back at the history of anthropology’s renaissance in China, after the introduction of reforms and the implementation of the open door policy in 1978, and shows how it was done first in the South (with the opening of the department of anthropology at Zhongshan University, Guangzhou, in 1981) and then almost a decade later in the North (with the creation of the Center for Anthropology and Folklore at Beijing University in 1992). From 1995, the number of conferences and symposiums in social and cultural anthropology organised by national institutions like the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences greatly increased, and “at the same time, fieldwork in China became progressively easier to arrange, both for Chinese and for foreign anthropologists” (2019: note 20).

45. We should point out that in ethnology, the age at which one’s first prolonged fieldwork is conducted (done during the PhD, and sometimes begun while doing a master’s), usually between twenty and thirty, can present certain problems in tackling certain subjects, as highlighted by Anne-Marie PEATRIK, who shows how age influences knowledge, sometimes becoming a “paradoxical criterion of reflexivity” (2009: §35 *sqq.*), even though it is rarely raised as a methodological question (compared with sexual identity, for example) (*ibid.*: §3).

46. In an interview on Chinese television (CCTV 9, *Shizhou yi ren* 施舟以人), Kristofer Schipper spoke of the “generations that preceded him” (in Chinese, *qianbei* 前辈) in the study of Daoism in France: “I count among [the sinologists] who are interested in the Daoist religion. In France, I’m the fourth generation [...] my predecessor in the 1930s was a French scholar named Henri Maspero [a student of Chavannes], and then my own teacher Max Kaltenmark”: “我是搞道教的嘛，对不对，在法国我算第四代...我的前辈在（上世纪）三十年代一个法国的学者叫马伯乐，他已经开始做，后来我自己的老师康德谟先生...” ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w8AGVSt\\_NcI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w8AGVSt_NcI), accessed 19 July 2021, extract begins at 2m 59s, our translation).

while doing fieldwork in Wenzhou, a local Daoist priest told me how his father was hounded by young Communist zealots during the Cultural Revolution and risked his life to conceal precious hand-copied Daoist liturgies from destruction. But now he, the son, has been named a valuable person of Chinese 'intangible cultural heritage'—borrowing the language of UNESCO—for his Daoist knowledge.<sup>47</sup>

41. Several factors favour more or less regular returns to the field in China, first and foremost the material conditions now making them possible, in situations where they could not have been planned in the same way before, particularly because the time and energy (as well as financial resources) that needed to be expended on transportation implied that the length of the stay in the country should be at least proportional to the efforts made, and the purpose should be worth the trouble. Is this to say that a kind of flexibility became part of ethnographic practice, making it possible for fieldwork to be divided up over time? Whatever the case may be, return visits are considered liable to stem from the serendipity that guides the ethnologist: "Irrespective of motives for returning, 'returns' in anthropological practice can never be a purely descriptive term. They are not just a matter of going and coming; returns have implications for the interpretations that we make. We go back to look for 'something' and this something is not always clear beforehand. It is rather after the event, as time passes, that we begin to ponder and realize its analytical value" (Talle, 2012: 73–74). Returns to the field thus give a temporal dynamic to the collection of data, inasmuch as they reveal the changes taking place on the studied sites.
42. The impression of perpetual disorientation trip after trip—which seems to be common in ethnology regardless of geographical area or time period—nevertheless takes on a special meaning in light of the major changes that Chinese society has undergone over a particularly short period of time. Aurélie Névot's field site is now "within reach" of roads and railways: since 2016 a fast train has enabled her to get there from the provincial capital in twenty minutes, while the Sani of the Stone Forest district have motorcycles or cars, and come to visit Kunming. On site, the infrastructure changes are also considerable. The karst—where Sani women came to pick medicinal plants, or sell their embroideries and culinary specialties—has closed in upon itself. To enter, locals must pass through turnstiles or guardrooms placed around the park, inevitably imposing a certain distance (this issue). In the case presented by Anne-Christine Trémon, the relationship between the Chinese of Tahiti (her first field site) and those of their native village in the Guangdong province in Southern China (her second field site, where she continues her original fieldwork, which has become multisite), has reversed in a sense: whereas before, the inhabitants of the native village encouraged Chinese from abroad to return and visit them, hoping that investments would follow, today, now that the village has been absorbed by the Shenzhen megalopolis and its inhabitants have become urbanites whose incomes have risen sharply, the diaspora has developed new expectations with regard to the locals (this issue).
43. It is easier to travel to China, or at least it was before the pandemic. But above all it is easier to stay connected with the people with whom one associates there, particularly through WeChat, China's most highly developed social network, used by everyone all the more because it is the main means of payment, certified (and encouraged) by the state.<sup>48</sup> This has changed the ethnographic relationship, because by using WeChat, ethnologists are no longer entirely absent from field sites when they are away. According to Georges Augustins et al., "the choice of investigation method depends on two elements: the question asked and the treatment possibilities" (2008: §14). Yet: "A return visit to past ethnological field sites provides the chance to review the methods used and assess their evolution between two periods of research" (*ibid.*: §1). On that topic, ethnographic study situations have notoriously changed, in China as elsewhere. Before the internet, mobile phones and wi-fi (which can be found in China even in the remotest locations), fieldwork was done in a greater isolation, which has been reduced by the ethnologist's inevitable increase in communication with their country. The once-greater concentration on local life has sometimes also ended up being distracted by these interferences.
44. At the same time as the increase in field site connectivity, another important change was the disappearance of alleys and dirt tracks in favour of roads. As Jean Copens has noted: "Sometimes a return visit is not possible because the subject has changed so much, it has practically disappeared" (2011: 44). In China, urban development plans are legion. They bring about the transformation of villages or urban districts, and sometimes ultimately lead to the disappearance of ethnologists' field sites, as was the case for one of us, Adeline Herrou. A whole swathe of her the field site of her thesis was destroyed, giving way to a broad avenue and a brand new district. "What sort of ethnography is possible when

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47. Extract from the article "The future of China's past: An interview with Mayfair Yang" by Nathan Schneider, published on the website *The Immanent Frame. Secularism, religion, and the public sphere*, on 23 September 2010 (<https://tif.ssrc.org/2010/09/23/the-future-of-chinas-past/>, accessed 19 July 2021).

48. "I left my village to go work near Canton a little over a year ago. My parents got a phone line installed right after I left. Generally in the village, people use the public telephone in a small shop when they need to make a call. You can also take calls by paying one yuan per received call, because the shop has to send someone to let us know", a migrant recounted to Hua Linshan and Isabelle THIREAU, who, with those words, begin their article "Liens personnels, expressions, repères d'identification. Actions expressives et nouveaux supports de communication en Chine", published in 2005. In addition to recalling a way of using the telephone that is so different from what we know today despite not being so long ago, the article shows that it was only a few years ago that China did not have WeChat, which today is probably that society's most widely used means of personal and relational expression.

there remain practically no links or reference points between the old and new district?" (this issue, §6).<sup>49</sup>

45. To further characterise the "ethnographic relationship", Frédérique Fogel and Isabelle Rivoal note: "The different field site visits of one same researcher do not reproduce one single, same configuration" (2009: §12). Long-term fieldwork also requires that we think about the successive configurations in which it places us, and what it means to "grow up with our interlocutors". When Gladys Chicharro studied Chinese children in an elementary school in a small provincial Chinese town, the teaching staff had "naturally" placed her with the children, because of her status as a young, unmarried woman. The ethnologist later worked with some of those same children after they had grown up (the first generation of single children to attain adult age) and found herself being attributed a different status and granted access to other positions in family genealogies. With hindsight, she was also able to observe weighty changes like the increase in the pressure to succeed in school, which ends up totally conditioning everyone's timetable, parents and children alike, and causes some to refuse to reproduce the very "disciplinarian" education pattern that they themselves experienced (this issue).

### **A broader observation perimeter with ceaselessly redefined contours**

46. One of the specificities of the anthropology of China is the need to ally the study of collected comments with that of texts that are either mobilised by the people themselves or liable to shed light on subjects we are studying (legends, historical writings, liturgical texts, popular literature...), since Chinese society has written much about its own history and (in a different register) its religious traditions. Brigitte Bapandier speaks of " 'thick boundaries' to be explored [which, for her,] were situated between myth in its oral and written versions and the rituals that are either embedded in or related to them" (this issue, §2). For the researcher in such a context, the difficulty that follows from this is to establish the connection between these different sources, without risking attributing to people a knowledge they do not have. According to Rémi Mathieu (1994: xiv):

It is of course not [Marcel] Granet's erudition that was the subject of criticism; on this point, there was even a near-consensus. It is rather his undifferentiated use of all those texts belonging to very diverse eras, styles, and schools of thought. Granet claims to refrain from reconstructing a single Chinese legend, but this is actually what he attempts when he places texts side-by-side without explaining the points of connection or discussing the authors' identity.

Making our own use of this criticism of Marcel Granet (who is nonetheless the author of considerable research and continues to be regarded as having done the work of an ethnologist), we could say that anthropologists must consider the legitimacy of the "points of connection" which they themselves establish between different types of data, particularly when these come from new communication media (WeChat and other social networks and blogs) or from texts whose "reworking" is central to strategies for organising and legitimising the changes in progress. By examining the rapid development of the island of Putuoshan, the famous Buddhist pilgrimage site, Claire Vidal studied the remaking of the local religious field under the effect of major economic policies, more specifically the development of tourism on the site, which, in texts written by the island's entrepreneurs, is now presented at once as a site of divine events, a centre of Buddhism in Asia, and a travel destination for walkers and other holidaymakers. On the one hand, the economy is now completely focused on welcoming visitors (other activities of the past, like fishing, having been shifted to other islands), to the point that monastic communities sometimes regretfully compare themselves to businessmen occupied with managing human and financial resources. And on the other hand, to counterbalance this development one might think, a reconfiguration of the Buddhist academy on the island was begun, to turn this site into a centre of erudition. Acquiring the appearance of a campus, it is accessed by student monks and nuns through competition, and offers a course of study that the rector hopes could go all the way to a PhD, copying an education model from universities, but "more or less deliberately attributing diverse meanings to erudition, and linking multiple functions to the academy" (this issue, §41).

47. Finally, relations with state structures have also undergone significant developments. Brigitte Bapandier noted it over twenty years ago (2001: 23):

Yet a trend is becoming apparent, which is explained by the collapse of the communist ideology, towards the possibility of an ethnology of the country, without discrimination in the choice of cultures studied. One could therefore collect the knowledge of China's various populations and ethnic groups, including the Han, without fear of highlighting contradictions that are too embarrassing to the authorities.

During her fieldwork on the so-called Confucian practices of a Han sub-ethnicity (the Hakka) of Meinong in Taiwan, Ko Pei-yi witnessed how, in a small Hakka village, an ancient irrigation system was almost destroyed by the construction of a water reservoir or dam. By returning to the same field site over

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49. Elsewhere, for other reasons, reconfigurations of spaces are even more political, as in former Uyghur-majority regions where today "residential districts have been built according to a single rigid, authoritarian urban development plan in the towns of Southern Xinjiang where the population is currently half Han" (TREBINJAC, 2020: §18).

a period of twenty years, she was able to see how the mobilisation against this development project brought about not only the return to the village of two successive generations of young people who had studied at the island's universities, but also the formation of a local learned elite, and even the creation of an NGO. But above all she observed how a new ritual for "the cult of the yellow butterflies" (*Huangdie ji* 黃蝶祭) was created by reviving (and somewhat reinventing) the "Three Offerings" ritual (*sanxianli* 三獻禮), a very old liturgical sequence that would have been transmitted since the time of the Western Zhou dynasty (1046–771 BC). The wholly contemporary emergence of this cult connected with popular Confucianism stems directly from the actions of the new local Hakka intellectuals in favour of the development of cultural tourism in the region (this issue).

48. Anne de Sales suggests that methodological questions surrounding ongoing changes are ultimately relatively similar on different field sites. In light of our research in China, she questions her own, carried out over a period of nearly forty years in the neighbouring Nepalese society. Nothing is ever immobile. Although Nepal has experienced nothing comparable to the urbanisation phenomena observed in China, it too "is also a rapidly transforming country that the anthropologist, herself within an evolving discipline, attempts to understand like a traveller watching a moving crowd from the window of a train" (this issue, §2).

## What world lies ahead? Three ways of understanding change

49. The present issue encourages a reflexivity that, for ethnologists, consists in directing attention to themselves, not just in order to try, through a play of mirrors, to take a reflexive look at their own culture based on what they have understood of the studied society,<sup>50</sup> nor just to objectify the conditions in which their field research was conducted,<sup>51</sup> but also to allow the long-term ethnographer to learn still something more about the social change. The texts assembled here have underlined three inductive forms of change apprehension that, in the reality of fieldwork, are closely interlinked: changes observed by ethnologists in situations of copresence with the people they are observing; changes which they are told about *after the fact*, or are offered for apprehension in different forms ("acted" in rituals, represented through art, staged for political purposes); and changes revealed to ethnologists in a way that is implicit in the ethnographic relationship, or in the interactions, situations, and even faux-pas that this brings about.
50. *Firstly*, a field study enables us to understand social changes at work, inasmuch as these are observable at a timescale established through and within the ethnographic relationship. It is in this way that ethnologists are witnesses of an "era", even to the point of coming to be seen by some of their interlocutors as transmitters of a memory. When Brigitte Bapandier returned to her first field site in Taiwan, the son of a medium—whose religious practices linked to the cult of Chen Jinggu she had studied thirty years earlier—welcomed her with an emotionally charged request: "Speak to me of my mother. I don't know who she was... In the morning she was at the market. In the afternoon she received her clients. I hardly knew her. *You know*." (this issue, §12). The child of the first field study, now an adult, summons the ethnographer's memory because he knows she was the witness both of a fragment of life (that of his mother) and of a certain "state of China", even though over recent decades, the transformations, often perceived as rapid and extreme, lead one to wonder what is to be transmitted to generations to come.
51. The makers of the film *The Road to Our Beautiful Life*, screened in the China Pavilion, were not mistaken in coming up with the idea to recount the story of change through the succession of generations of men and women. Under the banner of filiation, the images skilfully revealed what was at play in the social transformations of the past forty years. Deeply moved, the viewers easily subscribed to the suggested finality of the past and present changes depicted: that of building a "wonderful" future for children yet to be born. For the viewers and for ethnologists, the more their "zero-point of observation" was close to the one adopted in the film—in other words, the more they themselves had witnessed of the changes presented in quick succession—the more the path being travelled seemed real and

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50. To illustrate reflexivity in this sense, the famous anecdote told by Alfred RADCLIFFE-BROWN is very enlightening (and highly appropriate for the context in question): "A Queenslander met a Chinese who was taking a bowl of cooked rice to place on his brother's grave. The Australian in jocular tones asked if he supposed that his brother would come and eat the rice. The reply was 'No! We offer rice to people as an expression of friendship and affection. But since you speak as you do I suppose that you in this country place flowers on the graves of your dead in the belief that they will enjoy looking at them and smelling their sweet perfume' " (1952: 142, quoted by LENCLUD, 1990: 5). This story reminds us that beyond the risks of overinterpretation, our observations invite us to reflect on our own practices.

51. This principle of "epistemological vigilance", as pointed out by Pierre Bourdieu, Jean-Claude Chambodron and Jean-Claude Passeron in *The Craft of Sociology* (1991) consists in "[...] objectifying the (social) conditions of research possibility that depend on the researcher's generic position and the characteristics of a personal social trajectory" (BOURDIEU and HEILBRON, 2022: 13). As Pierre BOURDIEU points out, this scientific reflexivity makes it possible to get beyond researchers' bias, which consists in "conceiving of the agents they are studying in their own image" (2022: 56): "The sociologist can give himself some chance of escaping the social conditions of which he is, like everyone, the product, only on condition of turning the weapons produced by his science against himself; on condition of arming himself with knowledge of the social determinations that can weigh upon him and, especially, with scientific analysis of all of the constraints and all of the limitations linked to a determined position and trajectory in a field, in order to attempt to neutralise the effects of those determinations" (*ibid.*: 57).

striking: they had experienced this change at the scale of a life. And perhaps what they experienced there, caught up in the crowd at Expo 2010 with its ecological utopias, would have looked to them like a work of pure imagination straight out of a science fiction book, had they seen it forty years earlier.

52. The passing of generations is also the main theme that Gladys Chicharro has explored in the course of her fieldwork in Langfang (Hebei province), where her regular returns over a long period enabled her to understand the experiment that was the one-child policy, until its abrogation in 2016. From accounts of childhood to those of parenthood, the ethnography was elaborated over the long term alongside interlocutors who were growing up. One gets a sense of passing time in discussions pitting one generation's view of children's education against that of another; here again, the ethnologist is called to witness, but this time to witness not just an era, but also a cultural alterity. Recollections of a world of "before"—that past time when schoolchildren ran around and played in the streets of the district—arise in Gladys Chicharro's memory, as they do that of inhabitants who observed the same changes, some of them expressing a certain nostalgia for "a childhood 'that is much freer' " than it is in China today, particularly due to the serious dangers presented by the road traffic that has replaced the bicycles of the past (this issue, §30–31). When served to the ethnologist, these nostalgic words have a heuristic value because they reveal an attachment to certain forms of the experienced or reinvented past, but when they are furthermore presented by the people who are the subjects of ethnographies as something shared (with the ethnographer) of the experience of an era, these words also take on a reflexive scope. This is also the case when the ethnologist does not draw the same conclusions from this experience as her interlocutors. When Adeline Herrou expressed her surprise and regret that the small Daoist temple on Mount Qibao in the Ziyang region was going to be totally destroyed in order to be renovated, like the Qinghua temple on the outskirts of Xi'an, both in Shaanxi province (the very temple whose struggle not to be razed she had followed throughout the years of massive urbanisation that had profoundly changed the districts), a Daoist monk was astonished at this reaction: the temple was not ancient, having only been built in the 1990s. "And at that time, had it not replaced another ancient temple?" (this issue, §41). The attachment to the place was certainly shared, but what made the charm of that "ancient" temple was perceived differently. This is because between the ethnologist and the monk there was a difference of depth in the assessment of time. Faced with the many discontinuities observed over the course of her returns to her field sites, Adeline Herrou reports the difficulty (and also the heuristic interest) in "understanding field sites that always lack 'continuity' from one stay to the next [to borrow the vocabulary of cinematography], when it is no longer possible to continue one's investigation the way one started it, without shifting one's perspective and figuring out how to integrate the changes into the study, and sometimes reconsider certain data" (*ibid.*: §65). Long-term ethnography requires accepting the loss of one's reference points within the studied society, in order to better understand those of one's interlocutors, and their scope.
53. *Secondly*, changes can be understood through the field study inasmuch as they are related by our interlocutors in various forms (oral, written, and visual) that give intelligibility to their ways of conceiving regimes of temporality (past, present, future). The reinvention of traditions (or the vagueness they maintain) for purposes of tourism is widespread in China, whether directly linked with immaterial cultural heritage strategies or not, like the one evoked by Aurélie Névet. While studying *bimo* shaman practices in a small town where the Sani live (Yunnan province), she witnessed the extremely rapid transformation of local shamanism under the effect of policies aiming to produce an official state worship. This strategy ended up giving ICH status to the practices of the *bimo*, making them into "transmitters (of heritage)" (this issue). These processes gave rise to a homogenisation of shamanic writing, which was henceforth no longer to be transmitted in the secrecy of the master-disciple relationship, but rather to be learned in a state diploma school for *bimo*, placed under the aegis of the Religious Affairs Bureau. Over the long term of the ethnographic relationship, Aurélie Névet saw the development of an official discourse that froze a living tradition into a patrimonialised object for "the eternity of present time", an observation she was probably able to make owing to the marginal position she occupied on her field site, particularly with respect to her interlocutor, *bimo* Li, who agreed to transmit his knowledge to her without her necessarily completely becoming a shaman. As she writes, it is this experience of the "margins" that enabled her to gradually understand the changes in progress, as her position with respect to *bimo* Li evolved with the vagaries of the (long) time of the study.
54. Anne de Sales also experienced this singular ethnographic relationship with a shaman (transmission without initiation), but in the Nepalese context with the Kham Magar minority. She needed the time of the return—a decade after her first intensive field study—for the memory of the words of a villager who had accused her of "stealing culture" to retrospectively clarify her ethnographic trajectory (this issue). This had been born of an initial desire to describe a whole "tradition", that of the Kham Magar shamans (to the point of ending up knowing the ritual vocabulary better than that of everyday life!), and this had gradually evolved when the ethnologist endeavoured to explore the region's political upheavals, giving the villagers she had known for a long time another place in her ethnography, that of actors and witnesses of a historical situation. They told the story of the changes; she accessed their way of personally situating themselves in it.

55. *Thirdly and lastly*, the ethnographic study can reveal changes in progress as soon as they are brought to light in that which is implicit in the ethnographic relationship. One of the fundamental questions of field practice is: from where can we observe? A corollary question: what is the best point of observation for describing a social reality? It is amusing to again think of Ken Liu's novel *The Man Who Ended History*, which recounts that the time travellers sent into the past, to moments of conflict during the Second World War, could absolutely not be academics, but must instead be descendants of victims, who, with their individual emotions, would be better-placed to find out what had happened there and determine the true facts. If one thinks about it, the problem of the relationship with the "field site", starting with the researcher's legitimacy among those being studied, is not so far removed from our preoccupations as ethnologists, the only difference being that Ken Liu's travellers are invisible to the eyes of those being studied, which is obviously not the case of ethnographers. But although we are visible, we can also benefit from a floating status that, as many have experienced, sometimes opens doors that were previously locked. In some cases, it is this floating that offers the possibility of observing changes in progress. When academics from Shanghai introduced Claire Vidal to high-ranking monks in the monasteries of Putuoshan and in the official bodies of the administration of Buddhism—outside of ordinary customs that would have made it necessary to place her in a specific category—they offered her a position that was ambiguous enough to enable her to study the actions that monks were implementing to make the island into a recognised site of Buddhist studies in Asia. It was by casting a reflexive eye on her ethnographic relationship that she was able to understand and analyse what had until then been passed over in silence: the Buddhist Academy of Putuoshan's desire for a new role within the local monastic communities (this issue).
56. It is also by adopting a reflexive approach that Anne-Christine Trémon was led to re-examine the reality of diasporic relations between the Chinese of French Polynesia (among whom she had conducted her first ethnographic studies) and the inhabitants of Chung Yen Ha, a town near Shenzhen, the original home of the Chinese migrants in Tahiti, and the field site she visited later in the course of her research. When Anne-Christine Trémon discovered that in a book about the founding ancestor Zhenneng, someone had written a portrait of her in a chapter on Chinese people overseas, presenting her as a researcher studying Zhenneng, she realised the extent to which her research trajectory from Tahiti to the lineage's place of origin (initially motivated by a visit to the founding ancestor's mausoleum) had caused her to be linked to the venture of certain Polynesians wishing to go in search of their roots, to return to their origins (this issue, §18–19). Caught up in that "return" movement, she had a different perception of the category *huaqiao* ("overseas Chinese") highlighting the changes (particularly economic ones) that had the effect of redefining the diasporic relationship.
57. This self-reflection makes it possible to retrospectively see what was decisive in how the ethnographic relationship was produced and then evolved. When return visits to the field site take place over a long period of time, the observer's position is a shifting one, following—not necessarily consciously—the changes in China in a context of accelerated transformation. This has been the case for Ko Pei-yi, who studies the Confucian liturgical practices of the Hakka in Meinong, southern Taiwan. Although she initially kept her distance from the young Hakka university graduates born in Meinong who had returned to their native village to throw themselves into activism (remember that they were strongly opposed to the plan to build a water reservoir), she noticed that their actions had an influence affecting the very status of local scholars—those figures of authority on the knowledge of the Hakka with whom Ko Pei-yi was producing her research. One of them, a retired teacher who was also an cultural project advisor for followers of Confucianism and musicians, became a ritual master of the *sanxianli*, the Confucian liturgy of the "Three Offerings" (this issue, §36–37). Thus change invited itself into the ethnographic relationship: the researcher—practically a colleague—becoming the informant under the effect of the transformations in Meinong.
58. It is undeniable that our interlocutors make us think of time in their way, caught up as they are (like us but differently from us) in the effects of changes, and in the ways in which the historical, mythical, patrimonial, imaginary and anticipatory story of these changes is told. Sometimes the writing has trouble keeping up with the study, when sudden developments (which are sometimes dramatic turns of events) are too numerous. Analysing experiences of change for this issue of *Ateliers d'anthropologie* required each of the authors to take another look at her data in light of her research trajectory since her earliest fieldwork, in order to speak of things that may well have changed by the time readers read these texts. At a time when the Covid-19 pandemic seems to be receding little by little, and while continental China's field sites are still a little bit difficult to access, this fieldwork suspension period is more than ever an invitation to examine past collected data in a new light. Taking a distanced look at our ethnographies can sometimes have the effect of a rediscovery while searching for past traces of a present experience of time. In our field notebooks, we preserve what *we, with our interlocutors*, perceive of the era in light of, and in anticipation of, the world to come, especially if under *our eyes* this world delights in taking on the appearance of something implausible, thereby flirting not only with the anticipatory imagination of popular sci-fi, but sometimes also with simple reality and its surprising observations, to the point of making Bill Gates say, as quote in the epigraph, that certain facts—like the 6.6 gigatons of cement China used in three years (more than the 4.5 gigatons the United States used over the whole of the twentieth century)—are quite simply "mind-blowing".



**FIG. 3 – Map of field sites mentioned in the contributions in this issue**

Legend: 1. Brigitte Baptandier; 2. Gladys Chicharro; 3. Anne-Christine Trémon; 4. Aurélie Névo; 5. Claire Vidal; 6. Ko Pei-yi; 7. Adeline Herrou

Created by Sandrine Soriano (CNRS, Lesc-UMR7186); map background source: [https://d-maps.com/carte.php?num\\_car=15272&lang=en](https://d-maps.com/carte.php?num_car=15272&lang=en)

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