

Imagining the People: “Yellow Earth” and the Enigma of Nationalist Consciousness

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to adumbrate how the modern experience of the demands of nationalist imagination has exerted profound, contorting effects on Chinese consciousness in a burdened state of mind. We take as our analytical vehicle a deliberate juxtaposition of two supposedly inter-referencing texts: Chen Kaige’s *Yellow Earth* and his contemporary reminiscence of the film project. Rather than the apparent thematic unity of these two texts, we find instead a complex of incongruity and discordance that is impelled by the tension between what we call the folklorist and visionary impulses. These impulses produce competing and coexisting instances of authenticity that are, in the final analysis, only possible because they are authorized by the totalizing weight of nationalist yearning.

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