

ARTE DISTRIBUTION presents

REINVENTING CHINA

A 2x52' documentary

Directed by Karim Miské and Ilana Navarro

Produced by ARTE France and Program33

Provisional delivery: July 2022



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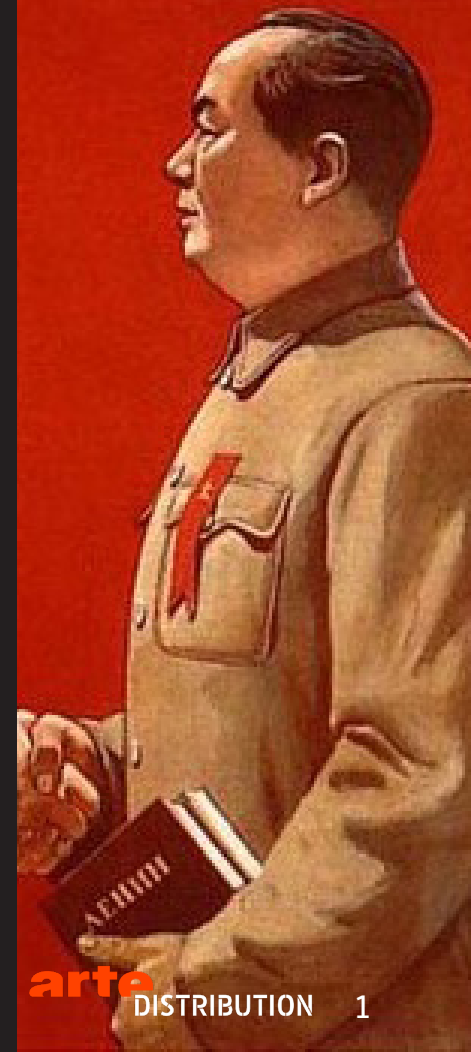
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Will China become the next world's leading power?

For over two millenia, China had seen itself as the center of the world, unrivaled and unchallenged. This geopolitical and historical investigation explains how did China, once the most powerful empire in the world, reinvent itself to return – just 150 years later – to its former greatness. What vision of the world and of their place on the international scene permeates the Chinese imagination? To answer these far-reaching questions, the authors have built a two-episode narrative – the Fall and the Rebound – that takes us through nearly 150 years of History, from the sack of the Imperial Palace in 1860 to the present day.

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Synopsis

China is on the brink of becoming the world's greatest power. Once again. To Westerners, the idea may seem new, but the truth is, for over two millennia, the country had seen itself as the center of the world, unrivaled and unchallenged, completely sealed off from foreigners, these meaningless "barbarians".

It's only in the 19th century, faced with the rise of Europe, that the Middle Kingdom suddenly had to take their existence into account. A shock from which it could have never recovered.

But far from admitting defeat, China spent a century and a half absorbing new ideas from all over the world, from Russia to Germany, from Japan to America before digesting them and using them to reinvent itself. Men and women with incredible destinies participated in rebuilding the country: a powerful dowager empress or revolutionary peasants, a Communist party zealot or a rebellious actress, all of them contributed to reinvent China.

This is the story of that spectacular rebound. How nearly two centuries of intense exchanges between China, its diasporas and the outside world allowed China to return to what it had been for two millennia: the world's greatest power.

After the success of the *Decolonisation* series (URTI Grand Prix International for Author's Documentary, 2020) ARTE and Program33 are collaborating once more on Karim Miské and Pierre Singaravélou's new project, examining the history of China. They are joined in this venture by director Ilana Navaro who brings all her sensibility and knowledge of archive footage to the film (Josephine Baker, Arte, Winner of BANFF Rockie Award 2020).

Together, they make a top-notch team to tackle a subject of considerable magnitude: the story of the world's new leading power. This story calls for even more boldness in both its writing and its direction, for it is a complex one, and unknown to the general Western public. It took just one virus, a shortage of masks and medication, bewildered politicians, and unruly citizens to tip us into a world in which China was at the center of it all. For the West, it was a slap in the face.

It also caused concern: was this the political model of the future, a techno-dictatorship run by such an iron-willed leader that he could make Putin, Orbán, and Trump look like lovable jokesters?

The speed with which the change occurred revealed the extent of the denial that had preceded it. After all, China's rise in power took place before the eyes of the whole world. Something, however, was clouding our vision: the somewhat murky idea that the world belonged to the Westerners. It had been conquered and shaped by them. What right did the Chinese have to come and take it away? That's not how globalization was supposed to work!

The irony is that China had made exactly the same mistake two centuries ago: thinking that the world belonged to them, believing that they were above everything and everyone. In that not-so-distant era, China refused to see that Europe was gaining power, preferring instead to reveal in its incomparable magnificence, its immense power, and its history that spanned several millennia. This blindness would cost them dearly. Humiliated by Europe, mortified by its former subject, Japan, the Middle Empire had no other choice than to contemplate the harsh reality of its decline. Thus began an interminable descent into hell. It would have taken an incurable optimism to imagine that this power balance would come to an end and that China could one day return to what it had been since the beginning of human memory: the greatest global power.

Today, this chapter has closed, and it is almost as if, a few decades after its fall, the Roman Empire had risen from the dead. Today, China aims to reclaim its place at the center of the universe, and the time has come to tell the story of this extraordinary rebirth.

It is a story that begins in the mid-19th century when China, under attack from all sides, realized that it would need to either reinvent itself or perish. This feeling of urgency transcended all strata of society, from the most refined mandarins to the most humble porters. But, as it has been the case on multiple occasions over the course of a history that spans several millennia, popular revolts would be the true creators of a new China. Appropriately, these immense uprisings drew on the ancient cultural background of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. But, in an unprecedented turn of events, they would also open up to new and previously unknown ideas from the distant mists of Europe and from the closer shores of Japan.

Once the movement was underway, there could be no turning back. In times of peace as well, the Chinese people demonstrated an incredible ability to absorb foreign ideologies and spin them into a new form. From Christianity to liberalism, from nationalism to anarchy, and from communism to fascism, all ideological movements originating in Europe, the United States, Russia, or Japan, were recast in the imperial Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist molds.

Woven from a thousand dreams and almost as many nightmares, this is the global history of China that we are going to tell.



Treatment

Narration will be the driving force of this series. With it, we will dive into a prolific history that we will embrace with our senses as well as with our ideas. The story will be sustained with the warmth and profound humanity of the voice-over, as well as the passionate music of Mark Marder. Acoustic or electric, classical, rock, or Asian- inspired, never shying away from a change in register or tempo, the music will accentuate the story's breaks and plot twists.

These breaks in the story will frequently be achieved via counterpoints that will offer a different view of China, from Europe, the United States, or Japan through interviews with internationally acclaimed historians. They will be an occasion to emphasize the extent to which the China of our imaginations has been shaped by icons of popular culture, from Tintin to Flash Gordon to Fu Manchu.

The images will also feature continuity as well as interruptions. This development has already allowed us to identify more than thirty documentary archive sources, including silk paintings, photos, propaganda posters, filmed reports in which Chinese aesthetics mix with foreign images, including European, American, Russian, or Japanese sources.

Alongside these images that will allow us to establish the historicity of the narrative, we will also use fictions that have been produced, mostly in China, beginning in the 1920s, in order to talk about the period in question as well as the past. For example, *Sorrows of the Forbidden City* (1948) brings to life Empress Dowager Cixi's rise to power in black and white. *The Burning of Imperial Palace* (1983) takes us into the heart of Yuanmingyuan when it was pillaged and set aflame. Some works of fiction retell history; others make history. For example, the film *New Women* (1934) recounts the suicide of a liberated woman. Like the main character, the star of the film, played by the formidable Ruan Lingyu, took her own life one year later after having been pushed to the limit by the sexist attacks of the tabloid press. Her funeral provoked an unprecedented wave of emotion.

The Chinese opera *The Red Lantern*, one of the only operas allowed during the Cultural Revolution, embodies the utopia imagined by Mao Zedong's wife, Jiang Qing. She preferred to imagine that equality between men and women was already a reality.

Similar to Chinese opera and cinema, martial arts will serve as a central theme of our story: from the Red Lanterns who flew in combat against foreign forces to the very end of the 19th century with Falun Gong, the Taoist movement that was outlawed by the Communist party 100 years later. It conveys the particular relationship between body, spirituality, and Chinese political history, but is also an extraordinary depiction and metatheater of the incredible and continual rebounds of Chinese society.

Finally, in order to translate the most fantastic events of our epic, we will rely on a simple but effective graphic design treatment of iconography inspired by *manhua*, Chinese comics, and the equivalent of Japanese manga. This will illustrate, for example, when Hong Xiuquan dreamed that God rebuked Confucius to him and when Lin Hei'er flew before the Red Lanterns and the astounded inhabitants of Tianjin. During these sequences, the figures in our story will be magnified like the demigods they had become for their contemporaries at the time of their crushed rebellions, joining the ranks of the legendary heroes and heroines who inspired the masterpieces of the Peking Opera. We will adapt our graphic style to this art form, while also taking inspiration from traditional cut-out forms in vertical strips.

We are aware that we are addressing an International audience, who may already be familiar with the East Asian aesthetic through their interest in manga/ manhua or kung fu films. This aesthetic has left its mark on our entire culture of cinematography, from the Kung Fu series to Kill Bill and The Matrix. Ultimately, while it is true that China spent nearly two centuries absorbing Western culture, the West has also been heavily steeped in Chinese cultural sources. It is here that the series will be built.





Episode 1 : The Fall (1860-1937)

This episode tells the period when the country has to reinvent itself. It starts in the 19th century, the West, in full colonial expansion, confronts a China that, until then, thought itself all-powerful. This half-century is one of constant convulsions of a nation on the brink of collapse as it sought to invent a way to survive, without losing its soul and all while improving itself.

In 1860, China is in the hands of the Qing Dynasty threatened by the Europeans during the Second Opium War. China is opposed to the will of the enemy to evangelize the country and to be part of the opium trade. Weakened by the war, the emperor dies a year later. Cixi, the emperor's favorite concubine becomes regent. For nearly five decades, it is Cixi who holds the intertwined destinies of the Qing dynasty and all of China in her hands. She tries to modernize the country as much as she can. But China is destabilized again by the first Sino-Japanese War in 1895, internal uprisings against Europeans and Christians led in 1900 by the Red Lanterns and the Boxers and the Republican insurrections of Sun Yat-sen in 1911

World War I breaks out shortly after, further destabilizing China. Japan forces it to surrender more territories, ratified by the Treaty of Versailles, despite Beijing's support of the allies during the war. Later on, while the country is trying to lick its wounds, the Chinese Communist Party with Mao Zedong as its frontrunner is gaining strength.

Coveted by the Westerners, attacked by the Japanese, China chose one of its many possibilities: between liberal democracy, the Confucian fascism of Chiang Kai-shek, the still thwarted emancipation of women and Soviet communism. After several humiliations and weakened by the conflicts, the nation tries to find a way to rise again.





Episode 2 : The Rebound (1937-2020)

This episode starts with the rise of the Chinese Communist Party in order to resist the Japanese invasion at the end of World War II. Mao Zedong creates in 1949 the People's Republic of China, allowing the territory to be unified again. His great economical project starts almost ten years later, in 1958, the Great Leap Forward, which turns out to be a complete failure. The Great Famine kills over 45 billion people in the countryside, the political opponents are tortured to death. The Maoist utopia has turned into a dystopia. But Mao Zedong wants to write History and to make the country shine beyond its borders thanks to the Great Cultural Revolution and the Little Red Book.

Numerous rebellious movements around the world take precepts from this work which even inspired the Black Panthers in the United-States. After the death of Mao in 1976, his Vice Chairman, Deng Xiaoping becomes the leader of the country. He wants to transform China into a global power and creates the concept of «socialist market economy». Despite the economic liberalization, intellectuals and students are calling for political liberalization. In 1989, among the 100 000 students occupying Tiananmen Square, thousands are killed by the army. The dictatorship is stronger than ever while it is trying to become a major economical power on the international stage.

The growth accelerates and China joins the World Trade Organization in 2001. Jack Ma, the influential founder of Alibaba wants to equal Silicon Valley. The giants of China start to collect personal data from the citizens for the state in order to establish a never-seen-before centralized surveillance system, that became more and more efficient thanks to Artificial Intelligence. In November 2012, Xi Jinping is elected General Secretary of the CCP, becoming the third communist leader to give China the place it deserves on the international scene. China has recovered from the pain. It is once again projecting its power into the world, through its communist ideology, its low cost industrialization model and despite the recent pandemics.



Creative team



Ilana Navaro

Writer-director

Originally from Istanbul, Ilana Navaro is a reknown author and director of documentaries and fiction exploring the themes of migration, cultural identity and multiculturalism. Her portrait of Josephine Baker has been acclaimed by the public and critics : Joséphine Baker, first black icon (Official selection at FIPADOC, Best Pitch award at Sunnyside 2017, bought by 19 international channels).



Karim Miksé

Writer-director

Before being the co-writer and co-director of *Decolonisation* (ARTE, Program33, Pitch Sunny Side 2019) Karim Miské has written and directed numerous documentaries, notable among them *Jews and Muslims: So Far, So Close*, which was bought by close to twenty countries. He also writes crime fiction novels that have enjoyed great success. For his first novel *Arab Jazz* he won the Grand prix de littérature policière 2012.



Pierre Singaravélou

Writer and scientific director

Pierre Singaravélou is a British Academy Global Professor at King's College London, a chief editor of *Monde(s) magazine* and sat on the steering committee of the best-seller *Histoire mondiale de la France* with Patrick Boucheron. He has published many works about the territorial construction of empires and the relationship between colonialism and globalism. He is a great specialist in contemporary Chinese history and its relation to the world.



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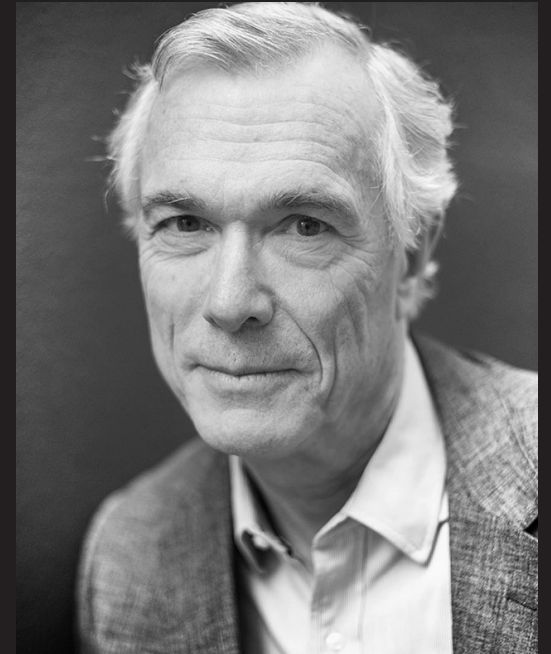
Anne Cheng

Anne Cheng is a Franco-Chinese sinologist, specialising in the intellectual history of China, and in particular Confucianism. Since 2008, she holds the Chair of "Intellectual History of China" at the Collège de France.



Julia Lovell

Julia Lovell is a British historian and currently teaches modern Chinese history and literature at Birkbeck, University of London. Her research interests include the relationship between culture and the construction of the contemporary Chinese state.



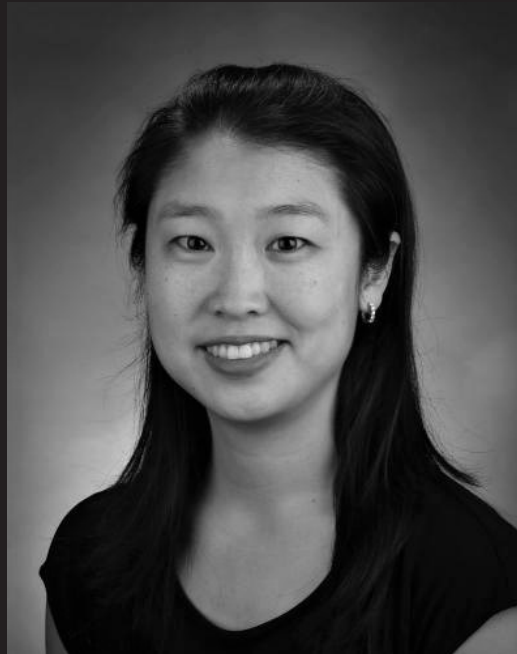
Timothy Brook

Timothy Brook is a Canadian historian and currently a professor at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver and at Shanghai University. A specialist in China, he is one of the pioneers of global history.



Kenneth Pomeranz

Kenneth Pomeranz is an American historian and currently teaches at the University of Chicago. A pioneer of global history, he has studied the way in which China and Europe experienced very different economic developments from similar situations in the 16th century.



Denise Ho

Denise Ho is an assistant professor at Yale University and a specialist in 20th century China and the Cultural Revolution.



Prasenjit Duara

Prasenjit Duara is an Indian-born professor of history at Duke University in the United States. His initial work focused on rural China, but he later turned his attention to issues of nationalism and imperialism.



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