Preface and Acknowledgments

In the introduction to his landmark study of realism in modern Chinese literature, written around the height of the “linguistic turn” in critical theory, Marston Anderson noted that the very term *realism* had become somewhat embarrassing for Western critics to use, requiring typographical alterations like scare quotes “to dissociate themselves from the now thoroughly discredited epistemology the term assumes.”¹ Anderson wryly observed that using terms like *classicism, expressionism,* or *romanticism* would provoke no such suspicion that the critic had “fallen into an uncritical endorsement of the mode and the theoretical presuppositions that support it.”² Three decades later, and in the medium of cinema rather than literature, the topic is not quite so sensitive. While film theory made its own turns to structural linguistics, poststructuralism, and Foucauldian and Althusserian ideological analysis in the 1960s–80s, classical theories of cinematic realism, such as those of André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer, were eventually rejuvenated, sometimes with a lingering semiotic twist, such as reinterpreting Bazin through the concept of indexicality. Still, we continue to use the term *realism* cautiously, knowing how carefully circumscribed the concept has to be if it is to avoid having the dreaded adjective *naive* attached to it. This book certainly makes an effort to exercise that caution, but without going to the extent of assuming that naivety is intrinsic to realism.

The seed of the idea for this book was planted many years ago in a conversation I had while still preparing for my PhD preliminary exams at the University of Chicago, when Tom Gunning mentioned that it would be interesting to sketch a history of Chinese cinema centered on the question
of realism(s). The notion seemed simple—even obvious, now that he’d mentioned it—yet it had not been done, despite that it has been widely acknowledged that realism was the master signifier of modern Chinese aesthetics for most of the last century, with several landmark studies of realism in modern Chinese literature, such as Anderson’s, already having been published, for example. While the plan for the book changed greatly over time (during which I also completed a different book project and other related and unrelated studies), what has remained constant is the conviction that questions of, or claims for, realism constitute a conceptual thread along which one can string together a cogent and useful, though obviously not comprehensive, history of mainland Chinese cinema. Each of the chapters could have been a book in itself—and some almost were, considering the sizes of the files of scraps that were cut to get the chapters down to (almost) manageable lengths. There are so many more examples that could have been included, so many additional interesting films and related issues that could have been discussed, not to mention many counterexamples that could further complicate my arguments.

Nonetheless, this book offers a number of ideas that I believe are tools that others might find useful—the concepts of prescriptive and apophatic realisms, for example, or the study of socialist formalism in Maoist cinema, or the expanded concept of post–socialist realism proposed in chapter 6. Still, my debt to many preceding studies of both film theory and Chinese film history will be evident. Although I obviously hope to have made a contribution that is original, I have no particular ideological or theoretical commitment to valuing startlingly counterintuitive readings for their own sake. Instead, many of my arguments try to develop ideas shared with others in new or more in-depth ways, in an effort to understand the objects of study in more formal detail.

My goal has been to make this book of wide practical use to scholars, teachers, and students. I am delighted that an open access Manifold edition, with linked film clips and more images, is available to all through a link given on the copyright page as well as through academic databases, thanks to a Toward an Open Monograph Ecosystem (TOME) grant from the University of Minnesota’s Libraries and College of Liberal Arts. To make the book accessible both to students of Chinese culture who are
not film specialists and to film scholars who are not China specialists, each group will occasionally need to endure basic explanations provided for the benefit of the other, or for general readers. Because works like this often are read not from cover to cover but in piecemeal fashion to suit the needs of a particular research project or academic course, I have tried to make each chapter able to stand on its own. Still, the arguments are intended to fit together in a way that I hope will be apparent to any reader of the whole book, with sustained threads of thought weaving through multiple chapters. Of course, the desire to make each chapter intelligible on its own inevitably leads to some repetition for those who read the book straight through.

This project has taken a long time to complete, and the number of interlocutors who have, knowingly or not, given me ideas, inspiration, and productive criticisms is so large that I have long since abandoned any intention of trying to list them all here. I sincerely hope that all the colleagues with whom I have participated in relevant panels, conferences, invited talks, or informal discussions over the last decade plus will recognize something of our conversations in the pages to follow and know that I am deeply thankful for their input. I am especially grateful to the hosts and funders of conferences and talks where I have presented pieces of this project, at institutions including Central China Normal University (Wuhan), Columbia University, Duke University, Harvard University, Hong Kong University, National Central University (Taiwan), New York University, Oklahoma State University, Oxford University, Princeton University, Rutgers University, Stanford University, the University of California–Berkeley, the University of Chicago, the University of Edinburgh, the University of Leeds, the University of Michigan, the University of Minnesota–Twin Cities, the University of Notre Dame, the University of Oklahoma, the University of Pittsburgh, the University of Texas at Austin, the University of Toronto, the University of Washington–Seattle, the University of Wisconsin–Madison, the University of Wisconsin–Stevens Point, and Yale University. The vibrant and ever-growing cohort of Chinese film scholars (as well as scholars in related fields) has provided me with a supportive and inspiring community without which I never could have carried such
an unwieldy project to completion, and I treasure both the intellectual stimulation and the many friendships that have developed along the way.

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