
Monstrous, Alienated, and Still Labouring Dead Philosophers:

Karl Marx (with 'Chinese characteristics' and 'chthulumedia features') meets

Confucius ... in a crepuscular theory crystal

David Fleming 

Como Citar | How to cite:

Fleming, D. (2025). *Filósofos Mortos, Monstruosos, Alienados e Ainda em Trabalho: : Karl Marx (com 'características chinesas' e 'vestígios de chthulumedia') encontra Confúcio... dentro de um cristal teórico crepuscular*. *Revista De Comunicação E Linguagens*, (63). Obtido de <https://revistas.fcsh.unl.pt/rci/article/view/1199>

Editor | Publisher:

ICNOVA - Instituto de Comunicação da NOVA

Direitos de Autor | Copyright:

This journal provides immediate open access to its content on the principle that making research freely available to the public supports a greater global exchange of knowledge.

Monstrous, Alienated, and Still Labouring Dead Philosophers: Karl Marx (with ‘Chinese characteristics’ and ‘chthulumedia features’) meets Confucius ... in a crepuscular theory crystal

Filósofos Mortos, Monstruosos, Alienados e Ainda em Trabalho: Karl Marx (com ‘características chinesas’ e ‘vestígios de chthulumedia’) encontra Confúcio... dentro de um cristal teórico crepuscular

DAVID H. FLEMING

University of Stirling, Scotland
david.fleming@stir.ac.uk

Abstract

This essay explores the Chinese “TV Theory Film” *When Marx Met Confucius*, which surfaced in 2023 charged with complex political, ethical, and philosophical tensions. Engaging several of these, the paper argues that the live-action portrayal of *Kong fuzi* (Master Confucius) alongside a “Deepfaked” Karl Marx, and a chaotic constellation of other Chinese politico-philosophical icons, appear designed to dislodge a potent political image of deep Chinese time—one that the crystalline theories of Walter Benjamin and Gilles Deleuze can help us to politically deconstruct and map. The reanimated aesthetic figures of dead philosophers intellectually performing therein are also discussed as being doubly or even trebly “monstrous:” first, in Marx’s sense of how alienated workers become dismembered and dis-organ-ised monsters under systems of capitalism; second, through Deleuze’s notion of the history of philosophy producing mutant “monsters” made to speak whatever their creators dictate. In this case, Marx and Confucius function as monstrous philosophical personae—intercessors for an absent-present author, one articulated through the master signifier of what is known as “Xi Jinping

Thought on Culture.” However, these propagandised images of still-labouring dead philosophers also betray a mutation in semicapitalist desires for technological *monstration*. For, newfangled non-human software actors gesture us towards the weird agencies of deceptive and con-trolling forms of “chthulumedia” which help to reify a synthetic and syncretic version of “Marxism with Chinese characteristics,” with this exposing in turn another facet of what we might call after Benjamin a “small crystal of the total event,” or what Deleuze might frame as a disjunctive crystalline synthesis. By such means the paper identifies a new twist to the ‘Lazarean’ return of long dead philosophers for political work in the remediated present.

Keywords

When Marx Met Confucius | Chthulumedia | Hunan TV | Confucius | Karl Marx; | Xi Jinping | Walter Benjamin | Gilles Deleuze | Dead Philosophers | Chinese Film Philosophy

Resumo

Este ensaio explora o filme teórico-televisivo chinês *When Marx Met Confucius* (Quando Marx conheceu Confúcio), que emergiu em 2023 carregado de complexas tensões políticas, éticas e filosóficas. Ao envolver-se com várias dessas tensões, este texto argumenta que a representação em live-action de Kong fuzi (Mestre Confúcio), ao lado de um deepfake de Karl Marx e de uma constelação caótica de outros ícones político-filosóficos chineses, parece concebida para deslocar uma poderosa representação política do tempo profundo chinês — uma imagem (representação) cujas teorias cristalinas de Walter Benjamin e Gilles Deleuze podem ajudar a desconstruir e a mapear politicamente.

As figuras estéticas reanimadas de filósofos mortos que ali “atuam” intelectualmente são igualmente discutidas como sendo duplamente, ou até triplamente, “monstruosas:” em primeiro lugar, no sentido marxista de como os trabalhadores alienados se tornam monstros desmembrados e “des-órgão-nizados” sob sistemas capitalistas; em segundo, segundo a noção deleuziana de que a história da filosofia produz “monstros” mutantes feitos para dizer o que os seus criadores lhes impõem. Neste caso, Marx e Confúcio funcionam como monstruosas personae filosóficas — intercessores de um autor ausente-presente, articulado através do significante-mestre do que se designa por “Pensamento de Xi Jinping sobre a Cultura.”

Contudo, estas imagens propagandísticas de filósofos mortos ainda em labor também traem uma mutação nos desejos semi-capitalistas de um “monstrar” tecnológico. Pois os novos atores não-humanos de software apontam para as estranhas agências de formas enganosas e controladoras de “ctulomédia”, que contribuem para reificar uma versão sintética e sincrética do “marxismo com características chinesas.”

Tal exposição revela, por sua vez, outra faceta daquilo que poderíamos designar, segundo Benjamin, como um “pequeno cristal do acontecimento total”, ou, segundo Deleuze, como uma síntese cristalina disjuntiva. Deste modo, o ensaio identifica uma nova torção no “retorno lazareano” de filósofos há muito mortos, convocados para o trabalho político no presente corrigido.

Palavras-chave

When Marx Met Confucius | Chthulumedia | Hunan TV | Confúcio | Karl Marx | Xi Jinping | Walter Benjamin | Gilles Deleuze | Filósofos Mortos | Filosofia do Cinema Chinês

“Borrow a corpse to resurrect the soul” instructs *The Thirty-Six Stratagems* (Taylor 2013), a treatise passed down since the sixth century as a guide to China’s political, martial, and civic leaders. An axiom also reanimated, if not doubled down on, for the recent Chinese “TV Theory Film” (Sun 2023) *When Marx met Confucius* (Li Yuesheng 2023). Therein, the long-dead titular idols—a wizened live-action *Kōng Fūzǐ* or Master Confucius (Gao Feng) and an uncannily “Deepfaked” Karl Marx (Xu Yazhou)—get respawned to star in an updated screen adaptation of Guo Moruo’s 1926 essay “Marx Enters the Confucian Temple.” From which, Marx’s red “crab” faced spectre visits the lingering spirit of China’s (then) paramount ancestral philosopher in a Shanghai temple, to discover if Communism might not take root in China (1999, 78).¹ In marked difference to its literary precursor, the “shanghaied”² bodies and synthetic souls haunt the modern psychotechnology dialogue in fluent Mandarin, in and around a virtual Hunan television studio—as part of a “phantasmagoric” sigil endorsing the virtues of what is known today as “Xi Jinping Thought on Culture.”³

By design, the multifaceted crystalline structure of *When Marx Met Confucius’s* (WMMC hereafter) generates an atmospheric head space for its two—what we might call after Susana Viegas (2023; 2025) “Lazarean” screen philosophers to playfully interact with a hyperreal swirl of computationally resurrected and informatically reanimated Chinese figures and artefacts. At one point the resurrected duo view a touristic VT of Laozi sightseeing ultra-modern Chinese libraries and archives, for example, while interviewing an animated Qin era terracotta soldier: transported from one necropolis

- 1 Throughout their discussions, which in Guo’s story are filtered through teams of translators and compradors, the duo come to see that Confucianism is in essence a “pre-scientific Marxism” (Dessein 2019, 138). In Gou’s story the revelation reads thus: “‘Ah, you’re right!’ Marx now began to exclaim: ‘I never imagined that two thousand years ago in the distant East there was already an old comrade like you! Our views are completely at one. How can there be people who say my thought is at odds with yours, that it does not suit the national conditions of China and cannot be implemented here?’ ‘Ail’ Confucius at this point suddenly exhaled a long sigh—a sigh long enough to release two thousand years of pent-up frustration” (1999, 84).
- 2 To “shanghai” or get “shanghaied” is an old naval term associated with dosing and kidnapping to force someone into labour against their will upon a ship (Fleming 2025, 8), or as Homay King puts it, “to drug or otherwise render insensible, and ship on board a vessel wanting hands,” if not to “transfer forcibly or abduct, to constrain or compel” (2010, 51). The term became popular in the mid-to-late 1800s, when sailors were often coerced into service on ships bound for Shanghai or elsewhere in China. In this context, I suggest that the two dead philosophers are being “shanghaied”—compelled to work against their will, or without consent—within a propagandist “vehicle” for Xi Jinping Thought.
- 3 Notion of “psychotechnologies” and the “psychotechnological” are derived from Culture Industry critiques but popularised by media archaeologists such as Friedrich Kittler (1999, 160) and Bernard Stiegler (2010) to foreground the controlling and manipulative affects/effects of media forms on psychic life, specifically foregrounding the erosion of critical thinking/thought. Stiegler’s engagement in particular gestures to the power of television and internet search engines, which appear vectorially evoked by the form and content of WMMC.

to another. Other dug-up relics include an animated photograph of Chairman Mao Zedong—which gets projected as an animated 2D surface *within* the virtual 3D studio, implying that the reanimated “president for life” has been condemned to a flattened phantom zone *à la* General Zod.⁴ Confucius and Marx also talk with a propagandist poster of Lenin, gawp at a reanimated ancient Chinese cave painting, marvel at modern magnetic bullet trains, and quiz a hologrammatic AI version of Confucius (more on which below). These and many more spectacular set ups are introduced by a roster of besuited “scholars and propagandists” well-schooled in “Xi Jinping Thought,” afore a small “live” studio audience composed of Chinese schoolchildren—who occasionally toss leading softball questions to the reanimated philosophers who respond as avatars for the *philosophies* they each lend their proper names too: “How did Marxism take root, then germinate, and finally grow into such a deep-rooted and lush tree today?”

Notwithstanding its contrived nature, the series emerged charged with complex and divisive political, philosophical and ethico-aesthetic tensions. Engaging these, this essay argues that the efficaciously curated constellations operationalised appear designed to dislodge a potent image of “deep” Chinese time—the temporal horizons of which can be critically mapped and politically deconstructed through the crystalline theories of Walter Benjamin and Gilles Deleuze. For, if the series appears engineered to evoke what Benjamin might call a *jetztzeit*-charged “small crystal of the total event,” I read it as a political film in the “main melody” (*zhu xuanlü*) key: engineered by China’s power players to promote the homogenous (action-image) advance of the governing historical-ideological narrative.⁵ My essay thus identifies a new twist on the Lazarean return of long-dead philosophers for political work in the remediated present.

To make sense of such, I first draw on Deleuze and Guattari’s contention that the history of philosophy can be read as the production of “monstrous” philosophical personae: figures repurposed to speak under the sign of a new author(ity) structure, with the dead philosophical icons here appearing fabricated as ideological “intercessors”

4 In *Superman II* (Richard Lester, 1980) the gang of three supervillains led by General Zod (Terance Stamp) get imprisoned in a 2D “crystal” prison.

5 Colloquially, the “main melody” refers to a dominant political motif first introduced at the CCP’s National Film Work Conference in the 1980s. David H. Fleming and Simon Harrison expose how during the Hu Jintao era the term increasingly became “associated with the state’s embrace of modernisation and leading citizens into a better future” (2020, 21). In today’s Xi Jinping era, Stella Chen charts how the phrase increasingly draws associations with “the general tone of the times (not unlike the German *Zeitgeist*),” and that in the worlds of mainland media production, “despite the push for commercial success,” main melody works often appear “largely unattractive to foreign audiences, owing to their sometimes stiff adherence to narrow CCP-led views of morality” (Chen 2022). I would add that online comments about the *WMMC* show suggest foreign audience do appreciate the series slow paced political and historical lessons, especially when compared to US political communications during the 2023 election cycle. While some commentators backhandedly celebrate the campiness and “cringiness” of the visuals and spoken CCP sentiments, the main melody mode also becomes interesting with respect to its political action-image film toying with time-image features.

of the sublimating master signifier of “Xi Jinping Thought.” Meanwhile, combining a mix of philosophical models from the East and West, including those of Confucius and Marx, allows me to approach the uncanny return of these politico-philosophical icons as commodified and command “(con)trolled” figures that appear abstracted, alienated and made monstrous to themselves.

Marx’s own techno-philosophical analysis of alienation, as a process of dismembering and dis-organ-ising the labouring body, also proves strikingly apt for approaching digitally resurrected philosophers. As too does Jean-Luc Nancy’s film theory, which helps finger ultra-modern technical forms used as acts of “*monstration*,” or technologically grounded *showings* (off), in and of themselves. From such a vantage, I concomitantly argue that the Deepfaked Marx resound with a wider posthuman “chthulumedia” assemblage of deceptive and violent image systems, whose weird agencies and cross-kingdom imminglings body forth a “grotesque” version of “Marxism with Chinese characteristics.” In tandem, my media-archaeological approach ultimately exposes two “phantasmagorical” philosophers whipped into new semiocapitalist forms of what I call “command (con)trolled” propagandistic performance.

Broadcasting the still-labouring dead to the “lying flat” generation (in CCP time)

Launched at the CCP’s “National Conference on Propaganda, Thought, and Cultural Work” in Beijing on October 8, 2023, WMMC was telecast the following evening across Chinese territory.⁶ On the Hunan Propaganda Department’s official website the five half-hour instalments are advertised as focusing “on the spirit of General Secretary Xi Jinping’s important speech at the symposium on cultural inheritance and development, while systematically explaining the historical origins, theoretical logic, formation process, and significance of the ‘second combination’”⁷. The latter is a political leitmotif associated with Xi’s syncretic blending of Marxist socialism with “Chinese characteristics” (*qua* traditional Han Chinese culture), which gets processually resynthesized to fit China’s techno-capitalist present (and future).

In contradistinction to China’s first two big screen “bioepic” (re)incarnations of Confucius—in Fei Mu’s National Defence Film *Kǒng Fūzǐ* (1940) and Hu Mei’s Huallywood blockbuster *Kǒngzǐ* (2010) which were respectively the most expensive Chinese films of their days—this more modest propagandist “screen-play” conjures forth only

⁶ Each episode was also made available to watch, rewatch or catch up on online.

⁷ The serial instalments of the pseudo-live show—produced by the Propaganda Department of the Hunan Provincial Party Committee and various Hunan Radio and Television subsidiaries—were respectively entitled: “Inquiry into the Scriptures”; “Mountains and Flowing Waters”; “The Road to Union”; “Creating New Faces”; and “Consolidating the Foundation and Creating the New.”

the *spirit* of China's ancestral master philosopher/signifier.⁸ Specifically, to reflect upon modern life and wants in Xi's (post)socialist Chinese present. By such coin, *WMMC*'s more proximate screen ancestor arguably becomes the 2011 Foshan television series *Kong Zi* (Han Gang & Qian Ning), which was strategically produced as part of a restorative "Chinese classic" (*gouxue*) programme in an earlier postsocialist phase, i.e. as part of a "relearning movement" endorsed during another intense era of state, social and subjective/psychic transformation (Lee 2011, 7), namely Hu Jintao's premiership, to help recirculate and rehabilitate the then denigrated Confucian image-imagination after political eviscerations culminating, during the Mao era, in the Red Guards dynamiting Confucius's tomb and hanging a naked corpse afore it (Mitter 2024).

To be clear, although the long-form 2011 drama did work to restage and dramatize import scenes from the venerated philosopher's life, these generally appeared suspended within a present-tense story device: a millennial PhD student researching on the legacy of Confucius' life and work upon modern Chinese life. Her research project includes videoing high school lessons on filial piety which, befitting for a primetime "relearning" lesson, appear illustrated using tableaux from the *Shengji tu* (*Pictures of the Sage's Traces*, 1444). In marked difference to *Kong Zi* though, *WMMC* retreats fully into the present tense and only softly toys with historical dramatization.

For example, the third "Road to Union" episode begins in a Republican era costume drama mode. Therein, Hu Shih (1891-1962), a political advocate for Chinese language reform and democracy (whose worldview is visually communicated by his dark Western suit, short spiky hair, and stylishly rimmed spectacles), approaches a young street peddler to buy some smokes. As Hu reaches for a Western brand from the boy's tray, an older figure dressed in a traditional Qing era costume—Zhang Shizhao (1881-1973)—interrupts: "You should choose a traditional Chinese brand." Their dispute over Western or Chinese cigarettes spontaneously escalates into a politico-philosophical debate over China's (past-)present modernising project: "Being invaded by modern powers has proven our traditional culture to be useless" submits Hu, "we must admit that we are inferior to them in every way." Provoked, Zhang counters that China should "study the West" but also "honour" and "bring back" Confucius: "We are not Western people. These are not Western lands. And we are not on Western time."

⁸ My typographical splitting and hyphenating of *screen-play* was a conceptual fashioning introduced in *Cinematically Rendering Confucius* (2025) and designed, there as here, to activate a cluster of overlapping politicised concepts embedded in this synonym for film. The suffix *play*, for example, fruitfully gestures us both toward theatrical personae and performances, but also vectorially to other Chinese traditions associated with strategic games and the art of war. At the same time, the breaking free of the word *screen* invites us to recognise dual, and seemingly contradictory, meanings bound together within this English contranym. For if contemporary usage typically associates screens with semiocapitalist displays and the projection of spectacles, the word can also denote obstruction or concealment, as in the case of a privacy screen, a room partition, or a windscreen (Fleming 2025, 6). The term thus evokes a sense of a strategic showing-hiding gesture.

As intimated, this historical scene is stylistically relayed through a familiar generic form—replete with intuitive shot-reverse-shots and “invisible” continuity edits. However, as the philosophers’ debate gesturally intensifies until the duo resort to barking slogans— “Study the West!”; “Honor Confucius!”— an incongruous off-screen voice calls “cut.” Thereafter, a filmmaking crewmember wearing modern attire is filmed jogging towards the philosophers, with a further cut revealing this to be a set up from a film (possibly this one) being shot on lot. The disorienting crystalline shift next introduces the spectres of Marx and Confucius, incidentally, dressed in earlier historical iterations of a Western Suit and traditional Chinese costume, commenting on the scripted argument they have just witnessed from behind the rigging and cameras (but which viewers watched in its (futural) post-production edited form). Marx and Confucius intercept the staged Qing-Republican era debate about Chinese modernisation, bringing the historical debate up the present day of the philosophical-film that embeds the Republican era philosophical-film within it.

The ludic establishment of a film-within-the-film trope here sparks a disorienting interplay of actual and virtual, while introducing a complex of past, present and future co-ordinates that recall Deleuze’s non-linear “crystal-image” models of narration from *Cinema 2*. Certainly, the *mise-en-abyme* conceit innervates the ancient spirit of Confucius (551-479 BCE) to dialogue with Marx (1818-1883) on the set of a 2023 film which remediates and embeds a Republican era debate staged between two more-recent historical philosophers, also regarding the (past) future of China and its relationship with Western culture and market ideologies. By degrees Marx and Confucius agree to take their multi-temporal hauntological conversations about how “China might combine the Ancient and Modern, Eastern and Western” inside the Hunan “lecture hall,” and so exit the film set to enter the virtual television studio where yet more ghosts and present day stagehands await them.

Other than this one opening gambit, the series otherwise eschews dramatized historical storytelling, implementing historicity and media archaeology instead, primarily as a means of diagnostically prehending and *presently* framing Xi’s “two combinations.” Such a gesture also resounds with a famous saying from the *Analects* (2:11) wherein Confucius proclaims: “A person who breathes warmth into the old while understanding the new is worthy to take as a teacher” (Confucius in Eno 2016, 51). Of course, the form and content of *WMMC* simultaneously also hypostasises the old anti-Confucian maxim (notably absent from the theory film) that, as another Republican era thinker Lu Xun (1881-1936) once reposed it: “Confucius owes his exalted position in China to the wielders of power” (2000, 126).

A relational interplay between such forces results in a charged atmospheric tension becoming palpable. This feeling is most concentrated in the dark crystalline heart of the television “lecture hall,” where the distributed absence/presence or presence/absence of the Xi author(ity) figure/structure most clearly comes to possess the host Professoriate and the spectral stars on stage, whilst directing itself towards the “live” audience of

uniformed schoolchildren: an arrangement that surfaces as an oft overlooked semiotic choice, embodying a synecdochal surrogate for WMMC's true target audience—an expanded cohort of disaffected youth known as China's "lying flat" (*tangping*) or "rotting away" (*bailan*) young, ideologically disillusioned generation associated with a sense of malaise engulfing the world's second largest economy. This helps contextualise the series' bells and whistles embrace of ultra-modern digital imaging technologies and its incorporation of young *Hanfu*⁹ wearing social media influencer such as Ms. Pengpeng—to help administer national-historic pride as a form of Traditional Chinese Medicine (see e.g. Lun Tain 2024; Zhang Tao 2023). Recalling our opening quotation from the *Thirty-Six Stratagems*, WMMC might here be interpreted as attempting to strategically resurrect the proverbial spirit of a young—"lying flat" and "rotting away"—political corpse too.

Monstrous *Monstrating* Philosophical Personae

When directed towards the two dead philosophers sat afore the schoolchildren, the previously cited notion of stealing a corpse to resurrect a spirit comparatively resonates with Gilles Deleuze's description of the "history of philosophy" being akin to a weird act of "buggery" and "immaculate conception"—wherein an author takes a philosophical figure "from behind" to give him "a child that would be his own offspring, yet monstrous," because he must say all that the new author makes him say (1995, 6). The resurrections of Confucius and Marx under the auspices of "Xi Jinping Thought" clearly also fit this model, while likewise appearing "monstrous" in Deleuze's other sense of betraying "all sorts of shifting, slipping, dislocations, and hidden emissions" which mark the return of difference (6).

In their final collaboration, *What is Philosophy?* (2004), Deleuze and Guattari also describe the "conceptual persona," through whom philosophy thinks, as "monstrous" fabricated figures. But these conceptual characters do not simply represent the philosopher; for, by performing their conceptual work, they essentially render the philosopher a mask or "envelope" of the persona. Yet Deleuze and Guattari also describe multiple conceptual personae here as "heteronyms"—a term they purloin from Fernando Pessoa, whom Cyril Connolly notes, generated new writerly identities "like swarms of bees" (Carmela 2011, 121). Over time, the philosopher's fate is ultimately to become their persona(e), meaning that the latter transcend(s) any historical

9 *Hanfu* of "China chic" describes a resurgence of traditional Han era style clothing increasingly worn by proud Chinese citizens to socially signal a form of cultural or national pride. Ms. Pengpeng in particular has amassed a huge domestic following by playing the traditional guzheng stringed instrument in foreign locations where she studies, and is celebrated by the CCP here for showing national and historical pride in China's ancient ways and traditions (including the instrument Confucius played).

or mythological identity (e.g., Plato's Socrates or Nietzsche's Dionysus) (2004, 64).

This swarm of concepts proves particularly productive for approaching the choreographed "Marx" and "Confucius(es)" of Xi, which we find buzzing around WMMC. But because these are screen beings, we can also locate resonances with other metastable terms that Deleuze introduced earlier in his *Cinema* books, such as the "intercessor" and the "aesthetic figure," with the former being an artistic figure through which a film/filmmaker thinks, albeit on this artistic plane via bundles of precepts and affects rather than philosophical concepts. The intercessor is thus a screen being through which Deleuze detects a "block of becoming" interconnecting director and character—with each understood taking a mutually transformative step towards each other (Deleuze 2005b, 222). As mediated screen fabrications, as opposed to actual historical thinkers, the subsumed cast of WMMC clearly also present artistic qualities that relate them to what Deleuze names *aesthetic figures*.¹⁰ Of particular relevance here though, is the extent to which, beyond their artistically stylised presentations, their *Zeitgeist* renderings also body forth a techno-aesthetic edge or excess (AI processing, audiovisual signatures) that uncloaks the material machinery of their abjected creation-projection.

The Deepfake rendering of Marx unquestionably stains these waters the clearest, exposing how a political semiosis of digital forms is put into play alongside spoken (conceptual) and artistic (affective and perceptive) forms. Of relevance here become the digital qualities and software signatures that communicate silent volumes about the embedding world and technologies (techne) co-composing these command-controlled performances and political projections. Jean-Luc Nancy's (2005) description of early film images as a form of *monstration*, or *monstrance* (French for display, demonstration), provides another useful framework here, for looking to earlier technological-image forms he argues that: "The image is of the order of the monster. [...] It is the manifestation of presence, not as appearance, but as exhibiting, as bringing to light and setting forth" (2005, 22). Key here is that as a mode of *demonstration* and display, technological images always already appear synonymous with knowledge and power structures; screening attendant violences and cruelties co-constitutive of such hegemonic forms.

¹⁰ Deleuze clarifies elsewhere that heteronyms or intercessors "can be people — for the philosopher, artists or scientists... but things too, even plants or animals" (Deleuze 1195, 125). Deleuze and Guattari also discuss vectorial lines transversally erected between philosophy and art's differing planes of creative organisation, with the authors acknowledging a style and art to philosophy as much as there is a philosophy of art. Across several books Deleuze insists that art and philosophy are equally creative domains, with the artist described working with bundles of perceptions and affects, while the philosopher creates concepts and machinic ideas. In artistic films featuring philosophers, however, the monstrous conceptual personae conjured onto screen creatively intercept the cinematic logic of aestheticizing characters to poetically express ideas: a plication amplified by politico-philosophical expressions like *When Marx Met Confucius* wherein the screen resurrections of real philosophical personae operate as affective avatars and aestheticised signs of the monstrous *philosophies* they each lend their proper names to.

William Brown's updating of Nancy's models to account for affective encounters with the order-smashing posthuman image-imaginary of the digital cinema also prove instructive, returning us to the present (if in a different register admittedly), i.e. to a digital semicapitalist epoch defined by spectacular *showing* rather than telling (2011, 2012) ideas made constitutionally palpable by WMMC courtesy of its newfangled digital forms that it works to de-*monstrate* its mastery of, and through which the human and the non-human are made to come in and as *grotesque*¹¹ digital spectacles that differently index the schematised links Nancy describes interlinking "images, violence, truth and cruelty" (Brown 2012, 410). Such notions also appear mapped over and onto WMMC as a meta-critical exercise in Confucian media archaeology, as we will discover below.

Phantasmagorical Philosophers in a Crepuscular Crystal

For official sources, it was important to communicate how WMMC reifies Xi's "two combinations" through both form *and* content. One article from *The People's Daily* enthused:

Through AI algorithms, the ancient and modern dialogues give the portraits of the ancients a real-life texture, and augmented reality technology allows classic works such as *The Communist Manifesto* to appear in the sky above the Yuelu Academy, automatically turning the pages of the talks as they unfold, so that people can be immersed in the real world (Sunyi trans Cowhig 2023).

Bracketing the immersive sense of a hyperreal Chinese semistream being evoked here, what I want to currently pursue is how the form and content of WMMC substantiate a meta-film-philosophy exercise, or critical-creative media archaeology investigation into the history and evolution of *monstrating* Confucian media, and its *monstrously* personified image-imaginary.

Two bookending sequences located in WMMC's first and final episodes can best illustrate this point, for together these generate something like a crepuscular crystal-image of the past, present, and future of Confucian media forms. Through them, Confucius emerges as something like a metastable "hyperphilosopher", a term inspired by Timothy Morton's concept of the "hyperobject" (2013), but here gesturing toward the *monstrous* hyperreal more-than-human philosophical persona that appears massively distributed across vast tracts of time, space, and media. To help set up my crepuscular argument, it is useful to recall that when the Lumière cinematograph first arrived in China in 1895, the transnational medium was immediately translated and transmedially mapped onto local, acculturated perceptions of the traditional Chinese *shadow*

¹¹ The term *grotesque* is here used in its original sense of referring to an excessive immingling of human forms with non-human forms (originally animals and plants but here technological forms) as encountered in the art and illustrations of the Ancient Roman grottos. (See e.g. Fisher 2017, 32).

play (*yingxi*) (Jia & Wang 2009), a turn of phrase that both complements and contrasts the German term encountered by Marx, emerging from the modernist European “culture of light,” wherein similar technologies were discussed as a *lichtspiel* (light play). Nevertheless, I ultimately advance the argument that Marx’s (and others) engagement with the *phantasmagorisch*—or phantasmagoria—charts a (crepuscular) middle ground between these flickering interstitial poles. But for now, I want to turn to the disjunctive synthesis of past and future media forms that Confucius serves to straddle and suture together *through* the vanishing medium of WMMC’s televisual present (broadcast in PRC “now time”).

Indeed, in episode one a VT segment titled “Confucius’s Metamorphosis” stages a playful yet pointed visual representation of Confucius’s ever-mutating historical image. Fittingly, a traditional shadow-puppet sequence is here harnessed to demonstrate how successive historical figures, beginning with Mencius, “added layers of makeup” to Confucius’s posthumous philosophical persona. Puppets dressed in different dynastic costumes thereafter circle the dead master’s silhouetted face as the voice-over professes how, in the Han dynasty, thinkers such as Jia Yi and Dong Zhongshu “dressed him up like a Taoist,” while later eras turned him into an emperor, politician, and even a pro-nationalist revolutionary. The visual gag, of having consecutive figures literally repainting the face, helps condense two millennia of historical stratification into a single scene, wherein the original Confucius withdraws into memory as sedimentary colourful portraits accrue and come to define him as a palimpsestual being. (Image 1.0, 1.1).



Image 1.0

Shadow-puppet sequence depicting Mencius applying make-up to a stylized Confucius. *When Marx Met Confucius*, Episode 1 (2023).

©: Hunan TV. Used under academic fair use / fair dealing for criticism and research.



Image 1.1

Continued shadow-play exposition of Confucius being colourfully made up by historical teachers. *When Marx Met Confucius*, Episode 1 (2023).

©: Hunan TV. Used under academic fair use / fair dealing for criticism and research.

Across the VT sequence the addition of ever more filtering layers sees Confucius' face take on a skin-like hue. As such, the critical-creative gesture also erects a crystal-image *mise-en-abyme* that helps anticipate or premeditate the ultra-modern practice of using a layered Deepfake mask to screen Marx in the Xi era (Image 1.6). Somewhat ironically then, the segment closes with the Chinese Communist Party Founder, Zhang Shenfu's call to "return to the basics," which retroactively legitimises Xi-era efforts to apparently strip away accumulated layers to reveal a supposedly "authentic" Confucius beneath,¹² one seemingly happy in this instance though to dialogue with a digitally rendered Marx whose face abounds with accreted algorithmic artifice.

In another crystalline gesture, these shadow play themes differently return in *WMMC*'s final episode, after the televisual Confucius is filmed encountering a futural science-fictional version of his own "self" within a pseudo-World Fair setting—chock full of Chinese robots and commodified technologies. For at the heart of this "Digital Confucius Exhibit" hovers a spectacular hologrammatic AI version of Confucius, performed by Gao Feng—the same actor playing the ghostly star of the Hunan series (Images 1.2, 1.3, 1.4).

¹² With this being an idea also driving forth other mediated representations by Zhang Shenfu's contemporaries in different fields, such as literary author Carl Crow (1884-1945) in his best-selling *Master Kung* (1937) and Fei Mu (1906-1951) in China's first ever screen rendering of the humanist philosopher in the patriotic National Defence Film *Kǒng Fūzǐ* (1940) made during the Sino-Japanese war. In Xi's era however, the stripping back of the Confucius image may also gesture to the trend of picturing him as a form of indefatigable kung-fu style 'action philosopher,' as in Hu Mei's 2010 film, tellingly portrayed by the hard-boiled Hong Kong star Chow Yun-fat.

Confucius: You imitate me quite well.

AI Confucius: I am your digital twin. I not only look exactly like you, but I have also absorbed your school of thought.

Confucius: Absorbed my school of thought!?

AI Confucius: Yes. And that's not all. In the 2,000 years since you passed away, many people have interpreted and developed your ideas. I've also mastered each of these schools.

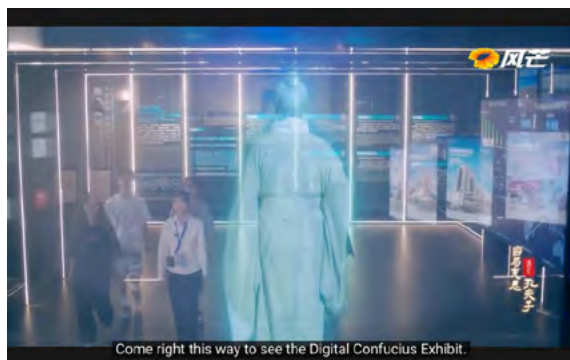


Image 1.2

AI-generated hologrammatic Confucius introduced with its back to camera/viewers. *When Marx Met Confucius*, Episode 5 (2023).

©: Hunan TV. Used under academic fair use / fair dealing for criticism and research.

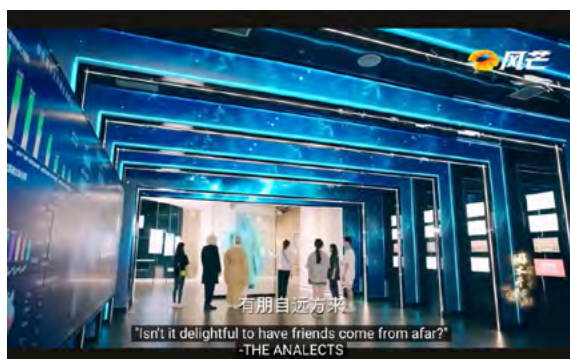


Image 1.3

AI- Confucius welcomes Marx and Confucius with line from the *Analects*. *When Marx Met Confucius*, Episode 5 (2023).

©: Hunan TV. Used under academic fair use / fair dealing for criticism and research.



Image 1.4

Confucius learns about the super-Confucian AI commodity fetish. *When Marx Met Confucius*, Episode 5 (2023).

©: Hunan TV. Used under academic fair use / fair dealing for criticism and research.

The weird temporal signature crystallising around this hypermediated science fictional encounter fittingly enough recalls one that Fleming and Harrison discuss in their earlier engagement with the modernisation programme articulated to the 2010 Shanghai World Expo - somewhat anachronistic event that, as Anna Greenspan put it, hypostasised the CCP's vision of Chinese modernity moving "forward to the past" (Greenspan 2014, 2; Fleming and Harrison 2020, 109-10). Of further guidance here is Walter Benjamin's earlier detournement of Marx's concept of the *phantasmagoria* in relation to the World Exhibitions of his lifetime, which he viewed as pilgrimage sites for commodity fetishism: "They open a phantasmagoria which a person enters in order to be distracted. The entertainment industry makes this easier by elevating the person to the level of the commodity" (Benjamin 2002, 7).

Benjamin's ideas certainly help critically reframe the elevated hologrammatic spectacle of Confucius viewed here, hovering becloaked in the blue lustre of a technological emperor's new clothes, projected forth as the ultimate Chinese semiocapitalist commodity. This fetishistic projection of a protected and purified historical spirit exposes how, to tear another passage out of Benjamin: "Tradition henceforth assumes the character of a phantasmagoria in which primal history enters the scene in ultramodern get-up" (Benjamin 2002, 116). Further recalling Benjamin's views on other crystal palace spectacles, this tech-spectre has also clearly "acquired a 'ghostly objectivity' and leads a life of its own" upon a "phantom stage" (Benjamin 2002, 181).

The Confucius ghost hosting WMMC here archaeologically acts as a vanishing mediator or dissolving stitch of sorts, suturing together the shadowy apparitions of the Confucian(-media) past and the phantasmagorical monstrosities of a computational AI-Confucian(-media) future. The latter embodies a synthesis of heritage signifier

and modern techno form that *WMMC* aims to express ecologically through its flashy mise-en-scene. As such, the fantasy splitting of Confucius into past, present and future media aspects grants a metastable quality to the massively distributed and differently mediated hyperphilosopher being, which complements the equally monstrous *monstration* of Marx, whose grotesque tech-image stylisation arguably appears even more violently and ironically charged in this context.

Technical Violence and Command Con(troll)ing of the Alienated, Still-Labouring Dead Philosopher

Among other things, Jonathan Beller fingers colonialism, slavery, the plantation, and the factory as the “blastosphere” of today’s computational control societies (Beller 2018; Fleming 2023). The colonies, be it noted, are reenvisioned by Beller as Europe’s first “content providers,” operating on systems of racist extraction and financialisation (Beller 2018, 166). Repurposing the work of Marx and Engels from a Chinese perspective, David Leiwei Li makes a comparable point, observing that the “First Coming of Capitalism” to China arrived through contact with extractive European colonisers and drug-pushing Victorian gunships. But in the new millennium, what Li terms the “Second Coming” of capitalism to China unfolded through a new flotilla of affective screen technologies/techniques—helping reshape the postsocialist Chinese state and subject in ways that further dissolved distinctions between the human and what he calls “post-human monstrosity” (Li 2016, 201-16). Such notions can be drawn into fresh relief by considering the posthumous forms of violence associated with the technical realisation of Marx, with its plastic “gelatinous blob” of a Deepfaked head resulting from the Hunan creators leaning into posthuman AI face-filtering software.¹³

As already intimated, what most interests me here is the extent to which certain showy excesses associated with the imaging technologies/techniques used to render Marx “unconsciously” (read materially and stylistically) historically contribute to meaning-making. For alongside scripted pronouncements and aesthetic considerations, these cannot easily be divorced from our ethico-aesthetic reading of *WMMC*’s expressive propagandist *imaging-imagination*. Before turning to the Deepfake technologies/techniques though, it is worth briefly backtracking to consider how technical imaging techniques and media forms circulating during Marx’s lifetime became profoundly entangled in, and helped to condition, the political philosopher’s own historical critiques of Victorian capitalism.

¹³ The term “gelatinous blob” is a literal translation of Marx’s term “*eine bloße Gallerte*” which he introduces and frequently uses in *Capital* to discuss the use value of undifferentiated human labour. See for example Paul Ritter’s translation (Marx 2024, 16).

For the media archaeologist Friedrich Kittler, media famously determine our collective situation (1999, xxxix). The writing and philosophy of Marx offer an illustrative case in point, especially on account of how tropes like alienation, anonymity, fragmentation, and abstraction appear directly drawn from, or conditioned by, adjacent discourses and practices associated with influential Victorian “psychotechnologies” (to borrow another term from Kittler). Consider for example how in ‘Wages of Labour’ (1844) Marx wrote: “Since the worker has sunk to the level of a machine, he can be confronted by the machine as a competitor.” Or again, where he describes workers and the machine, or worker and the commodity, moving into a mutually transformative relationships via the production of watches. For there, the generic “body of the commodity” increasingly becomes shaped by the “expenditure of human brains, muscles, nerves, [and] hands” to the extent that “all these *membra disjecta* come together for the first time in the hand that binds them into one mechanical whole” (Marx 2015, 31, 240; see also Novak 2007, 126). For the early film historian Tom Gunning, Marx’s philosophical writing betrays an even more “frequent use of optical metaphors to describe the process of false consciousness under capitalism,” with these skirting the camera obscura, the phantasmagoria, and the pre-narrative cinema of attractions (2004, 8), or *monstrations* to recall Nancy (2005, 86).¹⁴

Marx’s sustained use of media machines as material metaphors for how capitalism produces a form of distorted ideological illusion is also a gesture picked up by W.J.T. Mitchell (1987), who riffed on Marx’s description of the camera obscura as “a machine for producing a very specific kind of image” (1987, 162) or privileged form of “image behind the concept” in his politico-philosophy (162). As Mitchell explains, the properties and effects of the camera obscura helped Marx picture how “illusions,” “phantoms,” “chimeras,” and “shadows of reality” get conjured forth by German ideologists under the capitalist system (Mitchell 1987, 169). Both Mitchell and Gunning tally a broader set of Victorian optical machines found conditioning Marx’s philosophical thought, with the magic lantern—famous for operationalising “magic and necromancy” as part of a wider “phantasmagoria” tradition—serving as another key tutor image. With this tecno-device functionalised to aid Marx’s conceptualisation of “Exchange value” and “commodity fetishism” (Mitchell 1986; Gunning 2004; see also Derrida’s discussion of ghosts in his 2006 *Spectres of Marx*).

¹⁴ To me, Marx’s description of how the dynamic labour processes reduces the labourer’s contribution to a form of “still” frame subsumed within the dynamic commodity also recalls and recasts the technical unconscious/conscious image-imaginary relation between still photographic frames and the moving cinema—as evoked in Laura Mulvey’s description of the cinema as *Death 24X a Second* (2004). As Marx writes in The Section entitled ‘The Labour Process or The Production of Use-Values’: “That which in the labourer appeared as movement, now appears in the product as a fixed quality without motion. The blacksmith forges and the product is a forging” (1909-10, 6). Updating to this computational context, the Deepfake forges, and the Marxist screen product is a forgery.

Despite productively appropriating Victorian psychotechnologies as material metaphors, Marx generally warned against the extravagant and violent extractions inflicted upon human minds and bodies by the mechanical fruits of techno-capitalism. Of relevance to our considerations of Deepfake techniques below, Marx made much of the labourers who must create themselves an abstracted and dis-organ-ised body (whose parts become rendered divisible and interchangeable), such that it became a monstrous *gelatinous* entity “that exists and works outside of the contingencies of the human and the biological” (Novak 2007, 130). From this perspective, both workers and commodities (as well as commodified workers) increasingly came to be defined by the composition of dynamic and still parts fitted together into novel posthuman arrangements (2015, 47-9). Novak points to how Marx describes processes of mechanical production as a form of “artistic bodybuilding,” which “mechanically ‘takes’ pieces of bodies” and montages them together into new forms of “social hieroglyphic” (2007).

The influence of photography, cinema, and photographic montaging on Marx’s thought would be distilled and shipped forward in the critical philosophy of Walter Benjamin, whose work makes more tangible how technical imaging techniques and cultural productions interfere with and condition critical perception and analysis. For example, in a well-worn passage (particularly apt for our analysis of WMMC here), Benjamin celebrates Marx’s conjoining of “a heightened graphicness” [*Anschaulichkeit*] with a “historical materialist” method as a means of carrying over

the principle of montage into history. That is, to assemble large-scale constructions out of the smallest and most precisely cut components. Indeed, to discover in the analysis of the small individual moment the crystal of the total event. And, therefore, to break with vulgar historical naturalism. To grasp the construction of history as such. In the structure of commentary (1999, 461).

A finely cut and formally constructed assemblage (of the “refuse” of Chinese history) replete with historical commentary is precisely what we find manufactured as the historical crystal palace that is WMMC, and the Marx figure within it can serve as our small crystal of the total event,¹⁵ albeit our considerations of the grotesque philosophical monstrosity conjured and operationalised within this crystalline psychotechnology demand we wrestle with new software regimes and technical image forms that condition and determine today’s collective situation.

¹⁵ In the above Benjamin passage, we can locate a parallel conceptual reference to what I am here calling the “small crystal of the total event,” which we might frame as a privileged image, detail, or gesture that serves to expose in miniature the complexity of an entire historical situation. Here, the Deepfake Marx figure serves as a multifaceted crystalline image whose fragmented form and split faces allow us to discern different elements and forces at play within and across the wider cultural assemblage (Xi’s politics, semiocapitalist psychotechnologies, chthulumedias forms, and so on).

Before getting there, it is ironic to note that it was the 1875 photographic portrait of Marx—with his grey-beard and famous “lion’s mane” captured by John Mayall—that helped the Marx *imago* transmutate into an abstracted and reproducible politico-philosophical icon within his own lifetime (Scolari 2020, 122), and thereafter into a posthumous politico-philosophical *idol* (*qua* “social hieroglyph”) after the photograph became artistically reproduced and recirculated in socialist states and spaces such as Leningrad and Beijing. Increasingly circulating as overdetermined commodities or political fetishes that “demand faith,” these portraits of Marx were however ultimately no longer able of convincing viewers of such, as they had become hermeneutically “self-referential” (Scolari 2020, 145). Which is to say, empty signifiers: Marx = Marxism.

To be clear, the grotesque “gelatinous” Deepfake head and face of “Marx” operationalised across the series appears to vectorially approximate these previous historical portraits (Images 1.6). Which is to say, these (indexical and iconic) signs of Marx appear to have served as the “raw” data upon which the Deepfake AI was trained (see image 1.5). To return to our image of sedimentary palimpsestual portraits from the shadow play section, we might imagine Xi here to be applying his own proverbial layer of make-up to his key intercessor’s face.

Mediated Marx: Photographic Icon and Painted Idol



Image 1.5

Two-Image Composite. Left: 1875 Portrait of Karl Marx by John Mayall. Public Domain Photograph. Right: Photograph of the Great Hall of the People during conference to celebrate the 200th anniversary of Karl Marx’s birth. Photographer Ju Peng, Copyright: Xinhua News Agency Used under academic fair use / fair dealing for criticism and research.



Image 1.6

Deepfaked gelatinous Karl Marx trained on photographs and portraits.

When Marx Met Confucius (2023).

©: Hunan TV. Used under academic fair use / fair dealing for criticism and research.

Comparable forms of (dis)informatic-imaging put into circulation within contemporary semicapitalist cultures gesture to what Beller calls a historical shift toward an even higher orders of abstraction than that which Marx observed (and likely could have imagined) during Victorian-era capitalism, with the latest generation of AI machines, which harvest human cultures as their “unconscious,” leading to the old M-C-M’ (money-commodity-more money) formula that Marx conceptualised mutating into new exchange circuits of I-M-I’ (information-money-more information). By similar cookies, Marx’s theory of the labouring body also consequentially undergoes a transformative semicapitalist detour, in this instance through uncanny informatic software that signals a return with difference of phantasmagoric techniques that see the reanimated past/dead spectacularly deterritorialised from its/their historical ground. This is *WMMC* writ large.

The Chthulumedia Ethico-Aesthetics of the still-labouring Dead

WMMC’s use of Deepfake techniques exposes the CCP materially “(con)trolling” the Marx image-imagination. Coining the neologism *(con)troll* to mark a conceptual synthesis of “conning” and “trolling” associated with fake and affective forms of new media (such as Deepfake), Brown and Fleming (2020b), engaging with pornographic Deepfakes, link these weird deceptive techniques to newfangled forms

of “*chthulumedia*” that, rather than aiming for realism, increasingly render the fake hypernormal.¹⁶ Worth reiterating here is that the term Deepfake folds together notions of AI “deep learning” and “fake imaging” in reference to a range of software techniques that typically find the heads of celebrities or icons pasted, often unconvincingly, over the bodies of lesser-known labourers/performers (Brown and Fleming 2020b). The 2023 rendering of Marx is in keeping with this grotesque description, in that across several scenes the lesser-known Han actor, Xu Yazhou, labours to perform as Marx from “beneath” a glitchy AI software mask.¹⁷

A pointed ethical issue emerging around the use of Deepfake technologies gravitates around the reanimation of dead celebrities, or what Denver D’Rozario (2013) calls “Delebs,” without care or consent. An exploitative issue previously brought to a head by the digital resurrection of 20th-century stars such as Bruce Lee, Michael Jackson, Marilyn Monroe, and James Dean, who were all made to foster secondary brand associations or perform posthumously in commercials, concerts, and films not of their own choosing. But if for commentators such as Van Der Pool these posthumous techniques reveal a “craven exploitation of the dead” (2003, 18; D’Rozario and Yang 2016), for Katherine Fusco deriving consent/permission from long-dead icons becomes more of an interpretive project (2023). Xi’s interpretations notwithstanding, if we accept D’Rozario and Yang’s definition of celebrity as any individual enjoying public recognition (2016), then the iconic figure of Marx surfaces as an ironically charged example of a Deepfake Deleb made to interpretively/intellectually labour after their death, without consent.

Certainly, unlike the aforementioned Deleb performers, the alienation and exploitation of Marx’s persona takes on an added charge if viewed through his own techno-cultural critiques—especially when rebooted for the postsocialist-semiocapitalist Chinese context. For as noted, Marx once described mechanical production as a form of “artistic bodybuilding” that binds body parts into new monstrous wholes, for the benefit of violently controlling and dominating forces (Novak 2007, 126). As such, it becomes almost a *trolling* gesture to (re)arrange Marx’s *dissecta membra poetae* into

16 Brown and Fleming deploy their notion of *chthulumedia* to describe deceptive, tentacular digital forms and practices that emerged from a cephalopodic *umwelt* (2025, 2020a, 2020b). As hardware and software, *chthulumedia* archaeologically emerged from biomedial experiments that interconnect the brains and bodies of oceanic invertebrates and the architectural principles of computer memories (2020a, 10). Although inspired by encounters between, among others, H. P. Lovecraft, Vilem Flusser and Donna Haraway, *chthulumedia* appears monstrous not only by fantasy because it materially opens thought to nonhuman worlds and unfathomable posthuman scales and depths. Today in our world of screened semiocapitalism, *chthulumedia* typically operates through systems of distraction, duplicity, governance, and control (Brown and Fleming 2025).

17 Beyond the glitchy software signalling the fake nature of Marx’s gelatinous head and face, Xu Yazhou’s fluent Mandarin voice and acculturated Chinese gestures and movements similarly betray that this is not an attempt at producing an “authentic” or real approximation of the dead German thinker.

a monstrous Xi intercessor—who moreover woos viewers as a grotesquely fetishised techno-semiocapitalist spectacle. Ruminating: in one *WMMC* episode the gelatinous Marx reads aloud a line from a 1688 French edition of *The Analects* (gifted to Xi by President Macron in 2019 we learn): “A man should not be a vessel.” Confucius explains that, for him, “a vessel” meant a “tool, like a bowl, rather than a fully developed person.” Marx returns: “Capitalism certainly turns people into tools, so I can see where our views align.” While he says this though, Marx literally is a techno-vessel or Deepfake vehicle steered by a notoriously (con)trolling political author(ity) to profitably countersign off on “Xi Jinping Thought.”

Intriguingly, throughout the theory film the Deepfake Marx mask periodically deforms and reforms, occasionally thinning or stretching to bare the alienated approximations of the Han actor Xu’s otherwise digitally overcoded facial features. Pointedly, these glitching qualities appear to get leaned into rather than corrected, as if making a stylistic virtue of the excessive flaws that de-*monstrate* by other means Xi’s notion of “Marxism with Chinese characteristics.” Recalling Nancy, such effects also remind how today’s Deepfake techniques operate as an original *monstration* in and of themselves, that provide the techno-aesthetic ground for violent philosophical *demonstrations* (Nancy 2005, 86). As such, we encounter a Marx persona affectively styled as a complex superpositional being: a hybrid “con” that “trolls” the philosophical persona while weaving its monstrous tentacles deep into the textual/textural author(ity) (sub)structure of Xi Jinping Thought. The counterfeit *Geist* of the political thinker is accordingly both exercised (put to work) and exorcised (alienated from itself) in service of another *Zeitgeist*: rendering Marx a self-alienated being whose revolutionary Communist spirit appears violently transfigured and synthetically pasteurised to align with a Heavenly mandated, hierarchical world order—grounded in processed and stabilised Confucian ideals of unbending “loyalty to the sovereign” (Huang 1997, 191). *Welcome to the rising sea levels of the unreal.*

Conclusion

As discussed, in *WMMC*’s “Digital Confucius Exhibit” two or three monstrous politico-philosophical heteronyms come digi-face to inter-face. Remarkably, for a Confucian screen-play, none of the Confuciuses emerge or operate as a *real* philosopher (with specific ideas, beliefs, or worldviews). The ghostly ancestor hosting the grotesque spectre of Marx thus diverges from earlier screen iterations—such as the hard boiled “action philosopher” played by Chow Yun-fat in Hu Mei’s megaplex blockbuster; the doubt-ridden, all-too-human master in Fei Mu’s Sino-Japanese National Defence Film; and the baroque biographical figure rendered through the long-form Foshan television series. By contrast, *WMMC*’s bland anaesthetised (con)figuration appears little more than a benevolent, bearded forefather who, through performative displays of mild

amusement and abstract wisdom, weakly gestures towards the ineffable virtues of a golden era of Han “Chineseness” for a youth-oriented “Make China Proud Again” propagandistic commission.

Turning to the imaging of the posthuman AI Confucius, it is telling that this is introduced with his back to viewers, suspended within a blue enlightened phantasmatic zone (Image 1.2), akin to a hologrammatic science fictional version of Benjamin’s “angel of history” with his face oriented towards the past. As such, the two heteronymic *monstrations* approaching his elevated feet (image 1.3) arrive as the politico-philosophical refuse of a national catastrophe piling up before his (and the viewers’) eyes, as if the staid futuristic hyperphilosopher was himself able to “awaken the dead,” and master or “make whole what has been smashed” (Benjamin 1990, 258).¹⁸

With such in mind, the Hunan creators appear to have constructed their crystalline “theory film” to appear charged up with the efficacious energy of Benjaminian *jetztzeit* (now-time), or to hit home(s) with the Marxist (dis)charge that (film) philosophy should change rather than interpret its world.¹⁹ In the last analysis, though, *WMMC* fails to detach from the fabricated continuum of homogenous empty political time, emitting only the familiar hum of a melodious CCP progress vehicle. For here, the necropolitical refuse of China’s deep history, aired at prime time across the “One China” geopolitical territory, appears vortextually²⁰ spun out in the service of a synthetic vision of the PRC’s imagined future. Or again, as Xi’s ancestral intercessor reverberates it: “The Chinese people have a million-year-long human history, a 10,000-year-long cultural history, and a 5,000-year-long civilization. This is the foundation on which we’re building a modern Chinese civilization.” A backdated Han ideal more narrowly sliced by the command con(trolled) Deepfake Marx who flatters his fellow heteronym thus: “Your philosophy has been passed down for 2,500 years. It will surely last another 2,500 years. Scholars consider your work *the beating heart of China*.” Echoes here too then of the Party slogan from George Orwell’s 1984 that declares: “Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past” (1950, 29).

¹⁸ Benjamin’s famous description of the angel of history, based on Paul Klee’s *Angelus Novus* goes thusly: “His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed” (1990, 258).

¹⁹ Comparatively speaking this 2023 CCP screen-play might also read as a *cool* political extension of traditional Chinese medicine, standing in stark contrast to the heated affective chthulustreams of the “fake news” communications and divisive propagandising marking the 2023 U.S. election.

²⁰ “Vortextual” is a term coined by Garry Whannel for sports studies wherein online media streams are triggered by a whirlpool effect or vortex event’ that tends to draw in non-experts and outside commentators (see e.g. <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803120241523>). While *WMMC* clearly had a similar effect outside of sports studies examples, the term is also used here to evoke the series’ own vortex of Chinese textual references, and account of recursive media forms.

The crystalline encounter between all Xi's historical heteronyms and present intercessors within *WMMC* help perfectly reify how the social relations between people and classes have become over coded in China today by new forms of relation between semiotic commodities and tech-image forms. To riff on Benjamin again then, when Xi's Marx slipped out the door of paradise to meet Xi's Confucius, the storms of change were clearly not blowing. For, rather than permitting a crouched and coiled "tiger" to leap from a charged-crystalline prism into the future, we are instead haunted by a cagey "Tigger" playing with golden age idols: not to awaken history, mind, but rather to stabilize the current regime through the staged choreography of the long-venerated (and still labouring) dead.

Acknowledgments

I extend my sincerest thanks to Pedro Inock for his thoughtful assistance in translating the concepts and ideas in my title and abstract into Portuguese. Much appreciated. I'd also like to thank the article's two anonymous reviewers for their positive reports and enriching suggestions. Big thanks also to the editorial team, for all their hard work taking this essay from an early draft through to publication form. All errors remain my own.

References

- Ai, Jing. 2023. "Confucius Meets Marx: Xi's Propaganda TV Show." *Asia News*, October 19, 2023. <https://www.asianews.it/news-en/Confucius-meets-Marx-Xi's-propaganda-TV-show-59386.html>.
- Bai, Ji'an. 2006. "Hu Shih and Zhang Shizhao." *Chinese Studies in History* 39 (3): 3–32. <https://doi.org/10.2753/CSH0009-463390403>.
- Bazin, André. 1999. "On the Ontology of the Photographic Image." In *Film Theory and Criticism*, edited by Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, 166–73. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Beller, Jonathan. 2018. *The message is murder: The substrates of computational capital*. London: Pluto Press.
- . 2021. *World computer: Derivative conditions of racial capitalism*, New York: Duke University Press.
- Benjamin, Walter 1990. "Theses on the Philosophy of History." In *Critical Theory and Society*, edited by Stephen Eric Bronner et al. London: Routledge.
- . 2002. *The Arcades Project*. Translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- . 2007. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." In *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt, 217–53. Translated by Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books.
- Berg, Olaf. 2021. "Benjamin and Deleuze: Approaches to a Critical History in Film Images." *Research in Film and History* (3): 1–34. <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/15453>.
- Brott, Simone. 2010. "Deleuze and 'The Intercessors.'" *Log* 18 (Winter): 135–51. <https://www.anycorp.com/store/log18?category=Log>.
- Brown, William. 2012. "Monstrous Cinema." *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 10 (4): 409–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17400309.2012.666455>.
- . 2011. "The Pre-narrative Monstrosity of Images: How Images Demand a Narrative." *Image & Narrative* 12 (4): 43–55. <https://www.imageandnarrative.be/index.php/imagenarrative/article/view/184>.
- Brown, William, and David H. Fleming. 2025. *Infinite Ontologies of the Chthulustream: Posthumanism and Racial Capital in Contemporary Streaming Media*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Brown, William, and David H. Fleming. 2020a. *The Squid Cinema From Hell: Kinoteuthis Infernalis and the Emergence of Chthulumedia*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Brown, William, and David H. Fleming. 2020b. "Celebrity Headjobs: or Oozing Squid Sex with a Framed-up Leaky {Schar-JØ}." *Porn Studies* 7 (4): 357–66. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23268743.2020.1815570>.
- Chen, Stella. 2022. "Main Melody." *The China Media Project Dictionary*. February 18, 2022. https://chinamediaproject.org/the_ccp_dictionary/main-melody/.
- Ciuraru, Carmela. 2011. *Nom de Plume: A (Secret) History of Pseudonyms*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Confucius. 1997. *The Analects of Confucius: A Literal Translation*. Translated and with an introduction by Chichung Huang. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cowhig, David. 2023. "Mao and Confucius Meet Marx." *David Cowhig's Translation Blog*, October 16. <https://gaodawei.wordpress.com/2023/10/16/2023-mao-and-confucius-meet-marx/>.
- Crow, Carl. 1937. *Master Kung: The Story of Confucius*. Hamish Hamilton.
- Culp, Andrew. 2016. *Dark Deleuze*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Deleuze, Gilles. 1995. *Negotiations, 1972–1990*. Translated by Martin Joughin. New York: Columbia University Press.
- . 2005. *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*. Translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam. London: Continuum.
- . 2005. *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*. Translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta. London: Continuum.

- . 2006. “What Is the Creative Act?” In *Two Regimes of Madness: Texts and Interviews 1975-1995*, edited by David Lapoujade, 317–29. Translated by Ames Hodges and Mike Taormina. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. 2004. *What Is Philosophy?* London: Verso.
- . 2004. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by Brian Massumi. London: Continuum.
- Dessein, Bart. 2019. “Guo Moruo on Marx and Confucius.” *Asian Studies* VII(XXIII) (1): 129–50. <https://files.core.ac.uk/download/294839860.pdf>.
- D’Rozario, Denver, and Guang Yang. 2019. “The History and Evolution of the Market for ‘Delebs’ (Dead Celebrities).” *Atlantic Marketing Journal* 8 (1): Article 8. <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/amj/vol8/iss1/8>.
- D’Rozario, Denver. 2013. “Dead Celebrity Uses in Advertising and Marketing.” *International Journal of Consumer Research* 2 (1): 59–83. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/ijms.v5n2p1>.
- Dyer, Richard. 1997. *White*. London: Routledge.
- Eno, Robert. 2016. *The Great Learning & the Doctrine of the Mean: Translation, Commentary, and Notes*. Retrieved from <https://scholarworks.iu.edu/iuswrrest/api/core/bitstreams/84e59243-b0aa-4318-ac30-adco454cf6a3/content>.
- Feldman, Allen. 2015. *Archives of the Insensible: War, Photopolitics, and Dead Memory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Fisher, Mark. 2017. *The Weird and the Eerie*. London: Repeater.
- Fleming, David H. 2025. *Cinematically Rendering Confucius: Chinese Film Philosophy and the Efficacious Screen-Play*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Fleming, David H., and Simon Harrison. 2020. *Chinese Urban Shi-nema: Cinematicity, Society and Millennial China*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Fusco, Katherine. 2023. “Girls Who Can’t Say No: Celebrity Resurrections and the Consent of the Dead.” In *Incomplete: The Feminist Possibilities of the Unfinished Film*, edited by Alix Beeson and Stefan Solomon, 300–321. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Greenspan, Anna. 2014. *Shanghai Future: Modernity Remade*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gunning, Tom. 2004. *Illusions Past and Future: The Phantasmagoria and Its Specters*. Conference paper. <https://api.semanticscholar.org/CorpusID:14797459>.
- Guo, Moruo. 1999. “Marx Enters the Confucian Temple.” Translated by Matthew Finkbeiner and Joh Timothy Wixted. *Rendition* 51 (Spring): 77–86. <https://johntimothywixted.com/pdf/203.pdf>.
- Huang, Chichung. 1997. “Introduction & Terms.” In *The Analects of Confucius: A Literal Translation*, by Confucius, 3–35. Translated and introduced by Chichung Huang. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Jia, Leilei, and Jing Wang. 2022. “On Yingxi: Exploring the Origin of Chinese Film Aesthetics.” *International Communication and Chinese Culture* 9: 213–28. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40636-022-00257-1>.
- Kennedy, Niall. 2020. “The Intercessor or Heteronym in Gilles Deleuze and Fernando Pessoa.” In *Machinic Assemblages of Desire: Deleuze and Artistic Research* 3, edited by Paulo de Assis and Paolo Giudici, 273–80. Leuven: Leuven University Press.
- King, Dylan Levi. 2023. “Karl Marx Meets Confucius on Hunan TV.” *ChinaTalk*, October 28, 2023. <https://www.chinatalk.media/p/karl-marx-meets-confucius-on-hunan>.
- King, Homay. 2010. *Lost in Translation: Orientalism, Cinema and the Enigmatic Signifier*. Duke University Press.
- Kittler, Friedrich A. 1999. *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*. Translated by Goffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz. Stanford University Press.
- Lee, Joseph. Tse-Hei. 2011. “The Cinematic Representation of Confucius.” In *From Philosopher to Social Icon: Reflections on Hu Mei’s Confucius*, edited by Joseph Tse-Hei Lee, Ronald K. Frank, Renqiu Yu, Bing Xu. Hong Kong Shue Yan University. <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/46710977.pdf>.
- Levin, Noa Natalie. 2019. “Living Mirrors of the Universe: Expression and Perspectivism in Benjamin and Deleuze after Leibniz.” PhD diss., Kingston University. <https://eprints.kingston.ac.uk/id/eprint/46865/1/Levin-N-46865.pdf>.
- Li, David Peiwei. 2016. *Economy, Emotion, and Ethics in Chinese Cinema: Globalization on Speed*. New York: Routledge.
- Lun Tian, Yew. 2024. “Want More Innovation? China Should Open Up More, Says Harvard Scholar.” *The Straits Times*, June 24, 2024. <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/want-more-innovation-china-should-open-up-more-says-harvard-scholar>.

- Marx, Karl. 1909-1910. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Vols. I-III. Translated by Ernest Untermann. London: Charles H. Kerr & Company.
- . 2024. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Vols. I. Translated by Paul Reitter. Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press.
- Mitchell, W. J. T. 1986. *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Mitter, Rana. 2024. “The Real Roots of Xi Jinping Thought.” *Foreign Affairs*, February 20, 2024. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/china-real-roots-xi-jinping-thought>.
- Morton, Timothy. 2013. *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Nancy, Jean-Luc. 2005. *The Ground of the Image*. Translated by Jeff Fort. Fordham University Press.
- Novak, Daniel. 2007. “Labours of Likeness: Photography and Labour in Marx’s Capital.” *Criticism* 49 (2): 125–50. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23128732>.
- Orwell, George. 1950. 1984. New York: A Signet Book.
- Pye, Michael. 1994. “Syncretism versus Synthesis.” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 6 (3): 217–29. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23549531>.
- Sahraoui, Nassima. 2017. “A Crystal of Time: (Political) Reflections towards a History of the Now: Benjamin and Derrida.” *Anthropology & Materialism* (Special Issue I). <https://doi.org/10.4000/am.796>.
- Scolari, Baldassare. 2021. “Remembering Karl Marx: Image — Icon — Idol.” In *Highgate Cemetery: Image Practices in Past and Present*, edited by Marie-Therese Mader, Alberto Saviello, Baldassare Scolari. 121-148. Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft.
- Schwartz, Margaret. 2013. “An Iconography of the Flesh: How Corpses Mean as Matter.” *Communication* 12 (1). <https://doi.org/10.7275/R5TB14T7>.
- Stiegler, Bernard. 2010. *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations*. Stanford University Press.
- Stewart, Garrett. 2007. *Framed Time: Toward a Postfilmic Cinema*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Suni, Yu. 2023. “Xiangpai TV Theory Film When Marx Met Confucius Is on the 9th.” *People’s Daily*, October 10, 2023. <https://www.ldlx.com/content/646754/54/13143502.html>.
- Taylor, Peter. 2013. *The Thirty-Six Strategems: A Modern-Day Interpretation of a Strategy Classic*. Oxford: Infinite Ideas.
- Tim, Lee Wing. 2023. “Viewers Ridicule Propaganda When Marx Met Confucius.” *Radio Free Asia*, October 23, 2023. <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/china-marx-confucius-10232023200659.html>.
- Troyer, John. 2007. “Embalmed Vision.” *Mortality* 12 (1): 22–47. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13576270601088525>.
- Van der Pool, Lisa. 2003. “Thomasville Furniture Casts Bogart for New Line.” *Adweek* 44 (7): 18. <https://www.adweek.com/brand-marketing/thomasville-furniture-casts-bogart-new-line-61876/>.
- Viegas, Susana. 2023. “Death as Film-Philosophy’s Muse: Deleuzian Observations on Moving Images and the Nature of Time.” *Film-Philosophy* 27 (2): 222–39. <https://doi.org/10.3366/FILM.2023.0227>.
- . 2025. “Death-Images: Gilles Deleuze on Alain Resnais’ ‘Lazarean’ Characters.” Paper presented at the *Film-Philosophy* Conference, L’Università ta’ Malta, June 23. <https://www.um.edu.mt/events/filmphilosophyconf2025/>.
- Zhang, Tao. 2023. “When Marx Met Confucius: Xi Jinping’s Attempt to Influence China’s Intellectual Loyalties Has Met with a Mixed Reception at Home and Abroad.” *The Conversation*, November 9, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.64628/AB.q6aryxq9g>.

Biographical note

David H. Fleming is Senior Lecturer/Associate Professor in Film and Media at the University of Stirling. He is a co-founding editor of EUP's Screens, Thinking, Worlds book series and the author of five monographs and multiple articles, films, and video essays.

ORCID

[0000-0002-3176-0745](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3176-0745)

Institutional address

A32 Pathfoot Building, University of Stirling,
Scotland, UK FK9 4LA

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

To cite this article

Fleming, David H. 2025. "Monstrous, Alienated, and Still Labouring Dead Philosophers: Karl Marx (with 'Chinese characteristics' and 'chthulumedia features') meets Confucius ... in a crepuscular theory crystal." *Revista de Comunicação e Linguagens* (63): 156-182.

Received Recebido: 2025-05-30**Accepted** Aceite: 2025-11-04

© 2025 David H. Fleming. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.