

Monday  
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7:30 pm  
In English

“The anti-Fascist artist who went to China inspired by affection and respect ... found himself accused of being a Fascist, a reactionary in the pay of Soviet revisionism and American imperialism, hated by 800 million persons,” writes Umberto Eco of Michelangelo Antonioni and his 1972 documentary *Chung Kuo - Cina*. This controversial gap between foreign observer and native informant is vividly recaptured in the film *I Wish I Knew* (2010) by the contemporary Chinese director Jia Zhangke. Does such a gap signal any complementarity between the contending parties, and do the parties constitute any kind of whole? And how might these questions be approached through the fundamentals of documentary realism?

**Rey Chow** is Anne Firor Scott Professor of Literature at Duke University and the former Andrew W. Mellon Professor of the Humanities at Brown University. Her research comprises theoretical, interdisciplinary, and textual analyses. Since her years as a graduate student at Stanford University, she has specialized in the making of cultural forms such as literature and film, and in the discursive encounters among modernity, sexuality, postcoloniality, and ethnicity. Her many publications include, most recently, *The Rey Chow Reader*, ed. Paul Bowman (2010) and *Entanglements, or Trans-medial Thinking about Capture* (2012). She is also the coeditor, with James A. Steintrager, of the special double issue “The Sense of Sound,” for the journal *differences* (2011). Chow’s scholarly writings have appeared in ten languages.

### Constituting Wholes

Wholes are said to be more than the sum of their parts. This ‘more’ contains both a promise and a threat. When different elements – disciplines, methods, cultures, individuals – form a whole, they not only join forces, but also generate effects of synergy and a surplus from which also the parts can benefit. Being part of a whole is a way to acquire meaning and to extend oneself beyond one’s limited existence; and having a part in the whole is to have an enlarged agency. But wholes are also more powerful than the sum of their parts. Wholes constitute their parts, determining what is a part and what is apart, what has a part and what is deprived of agency. Becoming a part requires submission and although parts may not pre-exist the whole, there may still be something in the elements that exceeds being a part – even if only the possibility of being part of a different whole. While a desire for being whole or part of a whole seems all-too-natural, organic metaphors, which are often used to think part-whole relationships, have been criticized precisely for naturalizing relations of hierarchy and power. Yet, entirely abandoning the whole in favour of the part(icular) is also problematic. After the disenchantments of the postmodern post-cold-war period and in the face of global crises – be they financial, economic, political, or ecological – the critical need to include a holistic perspective is felt with renewed urgency, as is the concern that the situatedness of any such perspective and the multiple, incommensurable ways of constituting wholes may be forgotten.

The lecture is part of the **ICI Lecture Series Constituting Wholes**, which explores the double, both active and passive, aspect of “Constituting Wholes” within the framework of the multi-disciplinary ICI Research Focus **Complementarity and Wholes Which Are Not One**.

# Rey Chow

**Between Foreign Observer and Native Informant: Antonioni, Jia Zhangke, and China as Documentary**