

# SCREENS OF ENCHANTMENT:

From people's mobile cinema to digital consumption

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*Abstract:*

Mobile cinema, once an enchanting spectacle of modernity, offered its audience a rare opportunity to experience the magic of audio-visual technology, particularly for those who had limited exposure to such techno-marvels. That, too, was the case for socialist China's vast countryside, especially in the earlier days, when moving images and even electrification were novelties. Itinerant open-air cinema provided a fascinating experience for the rural population, and it is in this context that mobile cinema emerged as a powerful cultural and political instrument for the party-state during the socialist period, from the founding of the People's Republic in 1949 to the advent of a mixed-market economy in the late 1970s. But what does it mean to screen and

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watch open-air propaganda films in twenty-first-century China, a wired 24/7 consumer society where even digital currency has become the norm? Is it that the more things change the more they stay the same, or is it that the more things stay the same the more they change? These questions are central to my research on China's transition into the postsocialist period.<sup>2</sup> As with many aspects of contemporary China, there is no simple or uniform answer to this paradox. Nevertheless, this essay offers a brief genealogical account of that transition and examines the issue of "revisionism" within the context of mobile film screening.

**Keywords:** *mobile cinema, moving images, China, postsocialist transition, spectacle*

As a technology of governance, the history of open-air cinema in rural China parallels the media history of mobile cinema elsewhere. In many European colonies, mobile cinema often played a key role in colonial governance. In the British Empire, for example, standardized mobile cinema was introduced to its African colonies to support its World War II efforts. In fact, cinema vans remained a vital political and commercial tool in many African countries even after the war.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This research began with a project entitled *Changing Technologies*, funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), with Tina Chen (Principle Investigator) and Thomas Lahusen, between 2013–2016. In addition to research articles based on archival and ethnographic research, my work also involved creating photographs and videos for public exhibitions.

<sup>3</sup> Brian Larkin, *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008, pp. 73–108.

Likewise, during the Russian Civil War (1918–1922), trains equipped with loudspeakers, cinema screens, and propaganda materials—known as “agit-trains”—were dispatched to distant regions for recruiting soldiers for the Red Army. During World War II, the Soviet regime again deployed these media trains as a means of disseminating information to frontier regions to rally public support for its war efforts.<sup>4</sup>

In early twentieth century China, mobile film screenings were similarly dispatched for propaganda purposes by the Nationalists.<sup>5</sup> However, it was not until the founding of the People’s Republic under the Communists that mobile cinema became standardized and routinized on a wide scale, evolving into a systematic political and cultural campaign.<sup>6</sup> To conserve film and make it more available a special 8.75mm film was used in rural projections. Much like the Soviet “agit-trains”, Chinese mobile cinema and the accompanying cultural program were

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<sup>4</sup> Adelheid Heftberger, “Propaganda in Motion. Dziga Vertov’s and Aleksandr Medvedkin’s Film Trains and Agit Steamers of the 1920s and 1930s”, *Apparatus. Film Media and Digital Cultures of Central and Eastern Europe* no. 1, September 2015: <https://doi.org/10.17892/APP.2015.0001.2> [last accessed: 21 August 2024]. For the intertwined relationship between cinema and the train, see Larkin, *Signal and Noise*, p. 75.

<sup>5</sup> The Nationalists, or Kuomintang (KMT), overthrew the last dynastic empire and established the Republic of China in 1912. During the Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945), which merged into World War II, both Nationalists and Communists fought against Imperial Japan, with the former bearing most of the combat. After World War II, the resumed Civil War ended in the Nationalists' defeat, leading to their retreat to Taiwan in 1949.

<sup>6</sup> Jie Li, *Cinematic Guerrillas: Propaganda, Projectionists, and Audiences in Socialist China*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2023; Tina Mai Chen, “Propagating the Propaganda Film: The Meaning of Film in Chinese Communist Party Writings, 1949-1965”, *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* vol. 15, no. 2, Fall 2003, pp. 154–93.

designed to disseminate educational programs, government policies, and revolutionary values to the rural public. This was achieved primarily through the audio-visual spectacle of film and magic lantern shows, complemented by familiar folksongs and the emotive communal experience.<sup>7</sup>

While open-air socialist cinema both literally and figuratively projected imagery of socialist modernity in front of peasant communities, the enchantment of propaganda films involved more than the shock and awe of techno-spectacle. The process was simultaneously about the marvelous and the intimate, the novel and the familiar, as well as machine and labor. The insistence on establishing a rapport with the audience through communal activities and work, especially, meant that the people's projectionists were there to assist and agitate. Therefore, the masses were not supposed to be merely passive spectators; they were also encouraged to exercise their own agency to become new socialist citizens through their active participation and learning through these cultural events.

Although rural itinerant cinema as an active propaganda program was discontinued in the 1980s due to the popularization of television and fixed cinema, it has made a strange comeback in recent decades. At first glance, the resurgence of outdoor propaganda films seems to resonate with the recent tightening of political and cultural spaces in the past decade, effectively the

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<sup>7</sup> Tianxiang Li, “踏遍青山炼红心，放映宣传为人民” [“Traveling all over the green mountains to cultivate revolutionary hearts, screening propaganda for the people”], 廣西壯族自治區經驗交流材料之七 [Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region experience exchange No. 7], 1977, p. 3.

post-reform era, as if a ghost from the past is being resurrected.<sup>8</sup> Yet, despite the continuation of film screening as a cultural form, a closer examination of the current mobile cinema operations reveals a rupture rather than continuity between past and present practices. After all, current itinerant cinema functions within a different visual, technological, economic, and political context.

According to the government's latest statistics, China operates approximately 42,000 rural film projection teams.<sup>9</sup> Each evening, thousands of them fan out across the country, bringing propaganda films to even the remotest areas of the land.<sup>10</sup> For

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<sup>8</sup> It is important to note that neoliberal marketization is not incompatible with authoritarianism. In many ways, in the post-socialist era, China has been practising a form of state capitalism and state-led neoliberalism under a regime nominally called communist. China's rightward trend has been intensifying, especially since the aftermath of the 1989 social movement. For an example of how mobile cinema has been deployed for the control and exploitation of migrant workers, see Tong Lam, "Portable and Precarious: Life and Spectacle in China's Construction Camps", *Radical History Review* no. 132, October 2018, pp. 173–179: <https://doi.org/10.1215/01636545-6942477> [last accessed: 21 August 2024].

<sup>9</sup> According to the latest government statistics, 262 cinema chains were involved in the screening of rural digital films in 2023. In total, over eight million screenings were conducted that year, with 65% being feature films and the remaining mainly consisting of science and educational films. While Chinese bureaucratic numbers are not always accurate, these figures nonetheless indicate the existence of a very large ecology of rural mobile cinema. See "2023年全国电影票房549.15亿元" ["2023 National Box Office Reached 54.915 Billion Yuan"], *People.cn*, 2 January 2024: [http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrbwap/html/2024-01/02/nw.D110000renmrb\\_20240102\\_5-01.htm](http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrbwap/html/2024-01/02/nw.D110000renmrb_20240102_5-01.htm) [last accessed: 21 August 2024].

<sup>10</sup> The term "propaganda" carries negative connotations today, but it was initially used by the US military and businesses to describe their own information warfare and advertisements in the early twentieth century. Later, Western governments associated the term with information practices in

older folks, mobile cinema, from its setting up to the actual screening, could be a scene of nostalgia, an invocation of the revolutionary past of Maoist China that is fast vanishing in the rear-view mirror. According to Mao Zedong, who emerged as a prominent voice within the Chinese Communist Party in the early 1930s, the Chinese communist movement needed to adapt urban and industrial Marxism-Leninism to China's agricultural and pre-industrial conditions. The Maoist emphasis on the peasantry as the driving force of the communist movement necessitated focusing on the rural population as a primary site for mass mobilization and state intervention. Even after the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, the peasantry as a category continued to play a vital role in Mao's political strategy. The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), initiated by Mao, was itself a political struggle attempting to preserve the purity of the revolution by calling on university and high school students known as Red Guards to attack the complacent government officials, intellectuals, and perceived “counter-revolutionaries”. Many of these urban-based elites, along with the Red Guards, were subsequently sent to the countryside for “re-education”.

In short, throughout the state socialist period, including the upheaval of the cultural revolution years, mobile cinema was instrumental to the communist movement in the countryside, as

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regimes like Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, preferring to label their own efforts as “information campaigns” or “public relations” instead. In contrast, Communist regimes have historically embraced propaganda as essential and positive for shaping public perception. This essay employs “propaganda” neutrally, reflecting how the Chinese government characterizes its information campaigns in both the socialist and postsocialist periods.

it sought to serve, educate, and mobilize the rural masses based on the Maoist principles of praxis. Indeed, itinerant cinema was the most captivating form of propaganda dispatched to the countryside, including frontier regions predominantly inhabited by non-Han ethnic groups. In fact, in the early days of the socialist era when rural areas were not always electrified, even the arrival of film projection teams was itself a spectacle.

In those days, projectionists, predominantly men but occasionally women as well, were known as “red experts”, signifying that they were not only trained specialists in film screening and machine maintenance but also proficient in ideology, party policies, and revolutionary history, alongside their technical expertise.<sup>11</sup> They traveled on foot, carts, small boats, and by animals such as horses and donkeys, and were respected by locals as intellectuals and educators representing the state. As “vanguards of socialist construction”, their mission was as much about mass agitation as it was about education. They were tasked with promoting culture and science while fostering a strong work ethic and enthusiasm among the locals, all aimed

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<sup>11</sup> Dali baizu zizhizhou wenjiao weisheng ju大理白族自治州文教卫生局 [Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture Culture, Education and Health Bureau], 58 年至60年全州电影工作的基本终结及62年工作意见 [A report on screening activities between 1958 and 1960 in Dali Autonomous Prefecture], 大理白族自治州文教卫生局 [Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture Culture, Education and Health Bureau], 24 October 1961, p. 13; Joel Andreas, *Rise of the Red Engineers: The Cultural Revolution and the Origins of China's New Class*, Contemporary Issues in Asia and the Pacific Series, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009, pp. 75–80.

at boosting production.<sup>12</sup>

As guests hosted by villagers, these “people’s projectionists”—as the state referred to them—were expected to establish rapport with the locals.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the visit of the film projectionist team, comprised of two to three members, often occurred only once a year in many villages, and was an important multi-day event for local communities. Projectionists gave lectures on public health, news, and government policies; they taught peasants literacy and farming techniques, and even assisted locals on some everyday tasks that could not be easily accomplished otherwise. The preparation for the screening itself—from the setting up of the screen, the loudspeakers, and the generator—was a technological spectacle for kids and adults alike.

When night fell, projectionists commenced their activities with local folk songs and magic lantern performances, incorporating propaganda messages as part of the pre-screening entertainment. Audiences sometimes joined in singing along, experiencing laughter and awe, which built anticipation for the climax, i.e., the actual screening of the feature film, which was

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<sup>12</sup> Dali baizu zizhizhou wenjiao weisheng ju, 58年至60年全州电影工作的基本终结及62年工作意见, p. 3.

<sup>13</sup> Dongzhen Nong 农东珍, “努力改造世界观, 当好人民放映员” [“Work hard to transform the worldview (of the people), be a good people’s projectionist”], 廣西壯族自治區经验交流材料之八 [Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region Experience Exchange No. 8], 1977; Dali baizu zizhizhou wenjiao weisheng ju, “58年至60年全州电影工作的基本终结及62年工作意见”, p. 3.

the ultimate audio-visual spectacle that shattered the silence of the night. This was particularly the case during the 1950s and early 1960s when electricity was not yet widely available in remote rural regions. Mobile films, therefore, provided the peasantry with new ways of sensing, imagining, and believing.<sup>14</sup> Early outdoor screening events were so captivating and festive that sometimes locals traveled with the departing projection team to the next village so that they could experience the spectacle once more. It was also not uncommon for screenings to be in such high demand that audiences had to watch the film on both sides of the screen.

The films screened during this period—and, in fact, up until the end of the socialist era—were primarily revolutionary films with themes of class struggle, anti-feudalism, and anti-imperialism, including tales of the liberation of the peasantry from landlords and warlords, capitalists supported by the Nationalists, and Japanese invaders. Additionally, there were films about socialist China's model industrial cities and farming communes, infrastructural projects, and even the success of nuclear bomb tests. Before and during a screening, projectionists introduced the film's main characters, complex plots and storylines, and even unfamiliar images that were deemed to be too difficult for the peasants to comprehend by themselves.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Yanping Guo, "The Cinema of Make-Believe: Rural Viewers' Early Reception of Film Propaganda in Socialist China", *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* vol. 16, no. 3, 22 July 2022, pp. 1–16: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17508061.2022.2101853> [last accessed: 21 August 2024].

<sup>15</sup> Hebei sheng dianying faxing fangying gongsi 河北省电影发行放映公司

Indeed, it was not uncommon for projectionists to read out prepared explanatory notes for each and every scene.<sup>16</sup> In many instances, they also needed to provide instant translation of the otherwise unintelligible standardized language—Mandarin—used in the film into local languages (called dialects by the state). In later decades, plots and characters would be explained by posters and flyers distributed in advance by projectionists and local cadres. In a way, these open-air screening events were already multimedia and multilingual, and projectionists were also performers and commentators.

By contrast, the films being screened in the countryside today are no longer revolutionary classics, even though they are often about World War II (or the War of Resistance Against Japan as the government calls it), or the Civil War between the Communists and the Nationalists. Rather, they are freshly made digital propaganda films supposedly suitable to contemporary China's rural population, who are still administratively regarded as peasants. Moreover, while these films celebrate the rise of the Communist regime, they de-emphasize the narrative of class antagonism and revolution. They also conveniently overlook the rupture between the socialist and postsocialist periods, instead highlighting the continuity between the two periods through

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(Hebei Film Distribution and Screening Company), “农村电影队映前宣传材料选编” [“Selected pre-screening propaganda materials for rural projectionist teams”], December 1964.

<sup>16</sup> For an example of such explanatory notes, see Guangdong sheng dianying gongsi 广东省电影公司 [Guangdong Film Company], “农村电影宣传参考资料：青春” [“Rural film propaganda reference material: Youth”], 1978.

narratives of national triumph and the heroic leadership of the party-state.

From scriptwriting to production, from distribution to outdoor screening, these specially made anti-imperial Japanese war films circulate in their own cinema chains separate from the regular ones. Nevertheless, even though these films continue to assume that their intended audience has a simpler mindset, it is important to recognize that the rural space in which contemporary mobile cinema operates has undergone significant transformations. In the socialist period, China was very much agrarian with an urbanization rate of just below 20% even at the end of the 1970s, whereas now the country's urbanization rate is over 65%. In this new and evolving rural-urban divide, many areas classified as rural are, in fact, urbanized, and most of the peasant population does not participate in any farm work, despite the administrative categories imposed on them. Moreover, these peasants are no longer the driving force of the revolution but, rather, industrial and service workers, predominantly precarious ones, who are exploited systematically for their labor.

The demographics, too, has shifted profoundly. Chinese villages have long been hollowed out, with young and middle-aged adults flocking to major cities as migrant workers. Although some have returned in recent years due to structural economic transformation, their previous exposure to urban life has rendered these government-made films inadequate, if not irrelevant, as propaganda tools. In fact, the government itself has been mounting far more sophisticated information campaigns in traditional and social media, taking advantage of its tight internal media control and the chaos of the global media landscape to

reach domestic and international audiences alike.

This is perhaps more obvious in the very event of the screening itself. Although short information clips are still routinely being showed before the feature film, there are no more lectures, folksongs, or other performances by projectionists. Public health information clips on avian flu and Covid shown before the feature film may resemble those in the earlier times, but there are also plenty of clips about fire prevention, insurance, and other safety issues, indicating a shift towards security and other neoliberal logics.

While it remains uncertain what propaganda value the latest state-sponsored mobile cinema can add to its overall domestic information campaign, these formulaic, simplistic, and mostly anti-Japanese war films neither inspire nor enchant audiences as their predecessors did. Moreover, since the 24/7 digital infrastructure has saturated into nearly every corner of the country, the need to deliver entertainment to the countryside through mobile cinema seems to be redundant. Still, whether these films are anachronistic or not, they seem to continue to operate safely within the hegemonic discursive space of Chinese nationalism and party-state authoritarianism without eliciting much ridicule from rural audiences. In other words, while rural mobile cinema occupies only a marginal space in the larger context of cultural production in today's China, it continues to reflect the evolving ideology and politics of the party-state.

Unremarkably too, the projection team no longer needs to heroically endure the hardship of carrying burdensome projectors, film reels, and generators across mountains and rivers. To the extent that mobile cinema as a technology requires

networks and chains of other infrastructures to function, Chinese projectionists today are aided by a far more advanced infrastructure system. Even in remote areas, they often have access to well-paved highways, and they can easily connect their digital equipment to local power sources. Films can also be downloaded directly from special government websites, which in turn, create a trackable worklog of the projection team for surveillance and control. Unsurprisingly, film projectionists are no longer regarded by locals as intellectuals or educators. Neither are they hired as ideological workers or “red experts”. Indeed, most of them are not even government employees but instead work as subcontractors under precarious conditions. Compensated based on the number of screenings, there is also no expectation that their alienated labor will contribute to the establishment of communal rapport. In a sense, alongside modern highways, vehicles, power grids, internet connections, satellite signals, digital screening equipment, and so on, projectionists are relegated to functioning as a minor component of a vast—though not yet fully automated—infrastructure that efficiently delivers propaganda films. For now, nevertheless, they remain essential for the “last mile” of film delivery.

Whether we perceive China’s current rural mobile cinema program as a vestige of the socialist past or as the deepening of the propaganda state into a marginal media space amid the postsocialist period’s more restrictive and darker turn, the practice itself undoubtedly reveals a changed world and a changed China. Gone too is the theory that aimed to use films to agitate, educate, and cultivate socialist citizens, ensuring they became ideologically armed and politically aware in a new

society. Today, the rural masses, albeit more literate and sophisticated than their predecessors, are treated as passive spectators susceptible to the cinematic spectacle of nationalism and the party-state. In short, if these postsocialist film screenings are considered revisionist, it is because the party-state has grown increasingly reactionary after the social movement of 1989, particularly in the past decade.

Inevitably, as thousands of projectionist teams travel across China's countryside each evening to bring propaganda films to villages, they are competing not just with traditional television programs, but also with online shopping, video games, and many other forms of entertainment and consumption made possible by new media. The sparse crowds that do show up at the screenings, mostly composed of elderly individuals and children whose parents work elsewhere as migrant laborers, also have their attention oscillating between the sound and fury of anti-imperial Japanese war films on the big screen and the LED screens of their addictive handheld devices. Still, from a distance, the flickering lights in the intentionally dimmed village square appear just as captivating as they once were in the socialist era. The enchantment of light—be it from open-air cinema screenings or the glow of portable devices—prevails under the darkness of the night, if only for a fleeting moment.

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*Screens of enchantment ...*



Fig. 1. A rural screening in a village in Sichuan province. (Courtesy of Tong Lam, 2013.)



Fig. 2. A film projectionist team crossing a river in Ganyu County (a district in today's city of Lianyungang), Jiangsu province (Photographer unknown, 1957, private collection.)

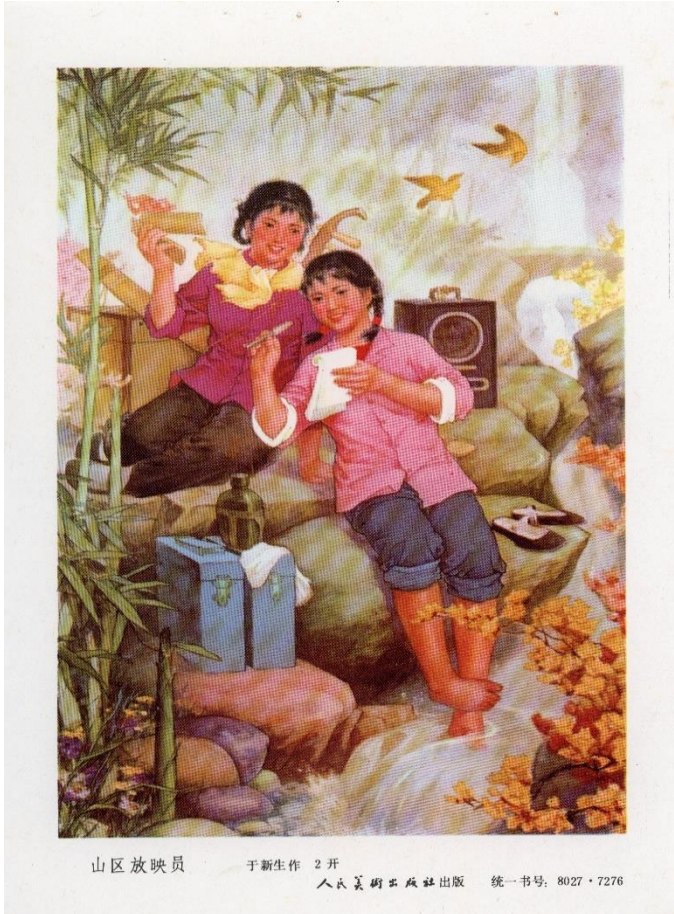


Fig. 3. A poster from the Chinese socialist period depicts two female projectionists resting on a hillside, rehearsing their folksong performance with a traditional musical instrument and a score, respectively. At the time, most rural projectionists were men, especially considering the physically demanding labor of carrying equipment in the countryside. However, in official propaganda, female projectionists were routinely highlighted. It was a way to showcase socialist China's achievements in gender equality, demonstrating how Chinese women actively participated in production and work involving technology and machinery. The original image was created in 1978 by Yu Xinsheng, a male worker in a film projectionist unit. (Printed poster, 1978, private collection.)



Fig. 4. A glass slide used in the early days of rural film projection for magic lantern performances, teaching the peasant audience about the importance of the use of the calendar, conservation, and planning. (Magic lantern glass slide, circa 1950s, private collection.)



Fig. 5. A husband and wife projectionist team who actually own the projection company themselves. These days, the government often utilizes private companies like this to deliver itinerant cinema to both the city and the countryside. (Courtesy of Tong Lam, 2014.)

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Fig. 6. A screening in a village in Sichuan province (Courtesy of Tong Lam, 2013.)



Fig. 7. A screening in a village square in Sichuan province (Courtesy of Tong Lam, 2013.)