

Film Propaganda as Medium of Perception Early Rural Screening in Maoist China (1949-1965)

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Despite that cinema was imported to China right after its invention in the 1890s, most of Chinese people, especially the peasants, had little access to film at that time. Film remained a bourgeois entertainment in the urban area for a long time. As the Chinese Communist Party took over China in 1949, the geopolitics of cinema transformed rapidly. Following the Soviet propaganda view that 'of all arts film is the most important', the CCP saw film as the most effective propaganda tool. The national film exhibition network was established in the 1950s to cover even the remotest area. Thousands of mobile projection team were sent out to the rural land in the name of educating the masses with socialist ideas and culture. It was the time that the large rural population of China finally got to encounter with film on a regular basis. Rural screening, the particular form of film exhibition conducted in the countryside area, then became a significant cultural practice of socialist China.

While Maoist China was known for its strict ideological control, the projection and reception of film in the rural area demonstrated that film propaganda was less a simple kind of brainwashing than a complicated process of communication. For the illiterate peasants, in the beginning, rural screening was a novel entertainment instead of socialist education. It was through their first encounter with film that for the first time they witnessed the arrival of modern technologies at the village. When projectionists brought the generator, projector, amplifier to screen film in the village, it was both the content of film and the film medium itself that led the rural viewer to experience the modernity. The peasants not only caught sight of the modern machine in the film but also learned about the cinematic equipment, the operation of electricity, and the socialist discourse of industrialization.

For the propagandists, rural viewers' unwanted responses should be diminished. The campaigns of 'helping the peasants understand film' were launched to standardize rural people's comprehension of socialist cinema, in which versatile projectionists performed different skills to attract viewers' attentions and translate the obscure political thoughts into local languages. However, such propagandistic strategy was in no way a foolproof. It was recorded

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that projectionists' aberrant action during the screening and rural viewers' deviant reception of film constantly hindered the efficiency of film propaganda.

Here, rural screening functioned as a mediated space, through which the cinematic experiences regarding the Party's ideological control towards the peasantry and the rural viewer's diverse reception of propagandistic messages were able to play out. It provides us an interesting conjunction to see how the Communist ideal propaganda interplayed with folk experiences (folk culture, folk wisdom) and how the active engagement of the viewer and the projectionist reframed the state propaganda. By offering analysis on the transformation of visual and bodily experiences in the rural society, which resulted from the advent of film, I attempt to conceptualize rural screening as an alternative framework so as to rethink the connections among film education, mass mobilization, and film propaganda. In so doing, I hope to complicate the Party-Masses relationship in a propaganda regime and enrich our understandings of socialist modernity from the rural stance.

The main body of my thesis consists of four chapters. In chapter one, I provide a historical analysis to explain what thoughts and practices contributed to the development of rural screening in Maoist China. I identify three kinds of sources. First, the Soviet Union had great influence on shaping the rural film exhibition network of China. I focus on Soviet 'cinematization' movement and Lenin's propaganda view to explain how the rural screening was made possible in the Soviet society. Second, I turn to Mao's 'Yan'an Talks' to understand to what extent Maoist rural screening differentiated itself from the similar practice of the Soviet Union. Third, I trace back the emergence of rural screening to the republican period in order to situate the practice of Maoist rural screening into a larger context of exploring the educational function of film in modern China.

In chapter two, I intend to discuss the early cinematic experiences of the rural audience during their initial encounter with cinema. I summarize these experiences into three patterns. First, I notice that the attractional elements of the film directly addressed the rural viewer and the viewer tended to receive the propaganda film as spectacles. I summarize this situation with the phrase 'seeing the attraction'. Second, I turn away from the viewing experience to examine the environmental context that framed the viewer's interaction with the film and the projectionist. Holding onto the term *kan renao*, I argue that the 'renao' environment offered a more flexible viewing/walking position for the viewer to casually 'experience' the rural screening. Third, I focus on discussing the bodily experience the audience gained from their 'tactile contact' with the film. I contend that their perception of film medium was closely related to the existed cultural experiences rooted in the rural society.

Peasants early film experiences mentioned above were considered as their 'incomprehension' of film by the Party, the Party therefore urged the projectionist to help the rural viewer understand the film. Against this backdrop, in chapter three, I investigate what kind of model projectionist was imagined by the Party to embark an ideal propaganda. I begin by explaining the concept *xiwen lejian*

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(cater to the folk tastes), which became a standard to measure the success of the cultural practices in Maoist China. By following the instruction of catering to the folk tastes, the projectionist made use of the popular folk cultural form to propagate the Party's message to the rural masses. Moreover, the projectionist also strived to build a good relationship with the peasant by catering themselves to the rural community. Such an intimate relationship between the projectionist and the peasant facilitated to improve the popularity of film propaganda in the rural area.

By looking into the actual communication existed in the different stages of rural screening, I examine the effectiveness of Maoist film propaganda in chapter four. I replace the conventional communicative model of 'sender-receiver' to 'sender-mediator-receiver' to highlight the role of the projectionist in mediating the propaganda process. On the one hand, I discuss how the 'deviant behaviors' of the projectionists obstructed the effect of film propaganda during the rural screening. On the other, I analyze the rural audiences' diverse receptions of film propaganda in relation to two different genres of film: news documentary and war film.

In sum, my study conceptualizes rural screening in early Maoist China as the kind of film propaganda that was not an instrumental tool but an enabling environment that allowed the rural viewer to engage with modern media and to experience socialist modernity. I understand the rural viewer as an iconic figure who maintained a dubious distance with the operations of dominant ideology. The viewers managed to come up with multiple coping strategies in order to seek out fun and pleasure of the activity of film propaganda.