INTERNATIONALISM AND CULTURAL EXPERIENCE
SOVIET FILMS AND POPULAR CHINESE UNDERSTANDINGS OF THE FUTURE IN THE 1950s

In 1950 a fifteen-year-old female middle school student, Jin Miaozhen, wrote to the editor of the Chinese film journal Dazhong Dianying (Popular Cinema) to ask why the cover photographs of the previous three issues featured Soviet films (Jin 1950, 28). The editor replied with an explanation of the guidelines: First, cover photographs represented the feature stories of each issue. In the weeks in question, the popular magazine introduced to Chinese readers the Soviet films Nongjia le (Happiness of the Peasant Household) and Gongke Bailin (The Fall of Berlin). Second, very few Chinese films were being produced at this time. In one of the issues, he explained, the editors had intended to feature the Chinese film Zhao Yiman, but the film had not reached Shanghai in time and therefore could not be introduced as planned. Finally, the editor reminded the young student, all should study Soviet film not only for its ideological and artistic merits, but because the Soviet Union was China’s big brother. The issue, the editor insisted, was not whether Soviet or Chinese film stars graced the covers of Dazhong Dianying, but whether or not the films contained progressive messages.

In this brief exchange, the editor of Dazhong Dianying summarized the role of Soviet film in Chinese culture. Soviet film provided socialist heroes and heroines through whom the Chinese could envision their future. The editor dismissed national borders as legitimate criteria for selection of feature articles and photographs. He privileged international socialism over nationalism to justify the strong presence of non-Chinese films in the magazine. He argued that the Soviet Union, as an established socialist nation, provided China with...
models of socialist development in all realms: cultural, social, economic, and political. At the same time, the letter draws our attention to the anxieties produced by the close politico-cultural ties between China and the Soviet Union, as well as to the explicit national identification of internationally circulating cultural products. With few exceptions, references to films included the country of origin of films and brief phrases characterizing the relationship between this country and the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Given the heavy reliance on imported films in the early 1950s, a time of national reconstruction and nation-building for the PRC, we may very well join the middle school student and ask, where is the face of China in this new vision? More generally, how could a nascent film industry fulfill the cultural needs of the new Chinese nation-state and citizen if it relied extensively on Soviet films to entertain and educate the Chinese people?

The complex dynamics linking national and nationalist cultural consumption to internationally circulating imagery, film, and other cultural products, receives much attention in the literature on globalization and culture. Often considered as a challenge to national borders, the relatively free-flowing movement of goods in the present neoliberal moment is understood in terms of circulation, networks, hybridity, and multinational or supranational institutions and corporations. The ideological work done by this characterization of global cultural exchange tends to leave undertheorized the convergence around a consumptive subject. That is, analysts of globalization rarely sufficiently interrogate how this subjectivity is contingent upon imagining ourselves as part of a particularly conceived global community. Nor do analysts generally consider forms of consumption located in noncapitalist contexts that promote alternative globally situated subjects. Through the example of Soviet film in 1950s China, this essay examines how Soviet film provided visual imagery, language, and a comparative framework central to Chinese self-understanding. This essay attends to the ways socialism and internationalism acquired meaning, in part, through practices of cultural consumption actively promoted by the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China. As Soviet and Chinese leadership understood the importing and exporting of film to each other, and its concomitant mass circulation, to be crucial to their shared struggle against imperialism and capitalism,
international cultural exchange shaped popular Chinese conceptualizations of self, nation, and history.

SOVIET FILM IN MAOIST CHINA

With the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in October 1949, new legislation, public speeches, newspaper accounts, individuals’ stories, photographs, posters, music, and film all confidently extolled the virtues of the new Chinese nation. The closely coordinated and comprehensive project of socialist nation building proceeded, under the direction of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), at all levels: economic, political, social, cultural, and intellectual. The process entailed demarcating and policing national boundaries by closing some borders and encouraging flow across others. In addition to the insistence on a temporal disjuncture that set the new China off from the old, an abrupt shift occurred within official rhetoric concerning China’s comparative historical location and the nations with which China should compare itself. Specifically, with the Korean War (1950–1953), the Chinese government sought to remove American culture and ideology from Chinese minds and territory. At the same time, Sino-Soviet relations, although never entirely free of tension, flourished as China fondly referred to the Soviet Union as its “older brother.” In addition to familial metaphors linking the Soviet Union and its citizens to China, temporal metaphors abounded. Propaganda materials informed the masses that the “Soviet Union was China’s tomorrow,” a tomorrow characterized by abundance and prosperity made possible through socialism. As China looked to the Soviet Union as the embodiment of its future, Soviet experts crossed the border into China and brought with them knowledge, materiel, cultural products, and a particular political-aesthetic ideal of the new society (Shen 2003).

Within this milieu, the CCP understood the technology of film to be a unique means to deliver visions of the new society to the masses (Chen “Propagating,” 2003). Because film was a relatively new industry, the Chinese state relied upon non-Chinese cultural products to a much greater extent in the realm of cinema than in art, literature,
or music. A combination of elements led the CCP to look beyond China’s borders for films that would define the newly emerging Chinese nation: first, distrust of class biases of the veterans of the preliberation Shanghai film houses; second, economic conditions within the film industry; and, third, belief in proletarian internationalism (Clark 1987). From 1949–1957, China imported 1309 films (of which 662 were feature films), while PRC-produced feature films through 1960 numbered approximately 480. Of the imported films, almost two-thirds came from the Soviet Union. Nationwide, by 1957, 468 Soviet films were translated and shown to a total audience of 1,397,289,000. Nine of these Soviet films attracted audiences of more than 25 million (Yan 2000, 38). Soviet experience, expertise, plot lines, and images thus occupied an influential position in communist China’s new national film industry and in the experience of the 1950s.

The abundance of Soviet films in China was most evident with the annual film festival. In the 1950s and 1960s, November occasioned celebration of the anniversary of the October Revolution in the form of a Soviet film week. As the Chinese state earmarked the October Revolution as significant and worthy of commemoration in both Soviet and Chinese history, numerous films at the annual festival triumphantly portrayed the success of the Soviet Union. The schedule published for the 1950 festival, held 3 through 9 November, included eighteen theaters in various cities with ninety-six screenings of thirty-seven different films (Dazhong dianying 11). By 1953, thirty cities participated in a festival that had been extended to ten days and featured color films only (“Wo guo jiang juxing Sulian dianying zhou” 1953). These festivals, although reportedly successful, only appealed to a narrow audience base because the films were shown in urban theaters. In larger cities, they likely attracted an audience composed of youth and individuals active in the film industry who could afford the ticket price. But in regions like Manchuria and Xinjiang, where Sovexportfilm (the company responsible for film exports and imports in the USSR) and the Chinese-Soviet Friendship Society (CSFS) had a greater presence, the propagandistic function of the film festival sometimes trumped commercial interests. For example, during the 1952 film festival in Urumqi, CSFS members attended films at discounted rates or gratis. Moreover, mobile projection teams...
associated with CSFS worked with the Cultural-Educational Board and the Political Department of the Military District to organize screenings of Soviet film in the city’s suburbs and industrial enterprises.¹⁰

Beyond the urban centers, similar Chinese film projection units ensured a broad circulation of select Soviet films across the nation. For example, in 1953 Dazhong Dianying announced that to further Sino-Soviet friendship, the Liaoding provincial government film bureau had organized eleven film projection units. These units would take Soviet film to the peasants of each county. The article reported that, in one month, projection units offered 180 screenings attended by 460,000 people (Li 1953, 18–19). The annual CSFS report for 1953 claimed a total of 35,000 showings attended by more than 57 million people.¹¹ When we place these figures within a broader timeframe and relative to the number of Chinese films screened in the 1950s, the sheer presence of Soviet film is striking. Moreover, the potential for profit, a motive for Soviet export, is also evident. As per the 1949 agreement between the PRC’s Central Cinematography Board, the head of the Beijing office of Sovexportfilm, E. G. Oksiukevich, and head of Sovexportfilm’s Eastern Department, Avetisov, the share of net earnings was set at fifty percent for Sovexportfilm, with ten percent of that to go to the Central Cinematography Board.¹² This agreement delineated more than the economic arrangements of film exchange; it also committed Sovexportfilm to participating in the development of a film industry in China by providing equipment and dubbed films as well as assisting in the establishment of national cinema in China.

For the purposes of this essay, the Soviet desire to develop the Chinese national film industry—a desire linked to economic motives and cultural policy—acts as the background against which we can explore salient aspects of the everyday experience of international cultural exchange. I am most interested in the everyday experience of cultural policy because it allows us to consider film as an important propaganda medium that furthered internationalism and anti-imperialism by being simultaneously embedded within national structures and boundaries and constitutive of a world revolutionary order. Such international (and internationalist) aspects of national film and its development in China are largely overlooked by scholars...
in the field of Chinese film, who tend to work within a national framework that concentrates on how the Chinese film industry came into its own by the mid-1950s, the same time that production in the Soviet industry drastically fell. Ideological differences following Stalin’s death in 1953, as well as Maoist isolationism in the wake of the Sino-Soviet split, overshadow the ways the two national film cultures and industries were intertwined and participated in the production of internationalism as concept and practice. This article seeks to widen our understanding of cultural exchange beyond the level of state-state political economy and to suggest how Soviet films functioned at the mass level as products delivering an internationalist message integrated into a politicized everyday.

REVOLUTIONARY POLITICAL-AESTHETICS

The statistics presented above concerning the number of Soviet films screened in China underscore the mass circulation and consumption of Soviet film and provide evidence for claims to the importance of Soviet film in everyday experiences of socialist revolution in post-1949 China. The statistics remain insufficient, however, as a means through which to explore popular understandings of Soviet film. Here we need to turn to the politico-aesthetic and discursive realms. By 1949, Soviet film was already well established as a political-aesthetic ideal worthy of emulation. More than two decades of Soviet film presence in China meant that Soviet films influenced Chinese audience members and filmmakers alike even prior to 1949. The Burial of Lenin, a news documentary, was the first Soviet film shown in China in March 1924. The South China Film and Drama Society then screened the first feature film the following year. In 1927, Soviet film entered the filmic discourse with an essay in a special issue of Mingxing that introduced the Soviet film industry and discussed the state of Soviet film. By 1932, cultural theorists including Xia Yan and Deng Baiqi strongly supported Soviet film. They saw it as an alternative to the business-oriented perspective associated with films produced by capitalist countries and the majority of Chinese film houses. These influential individuals wrote essays and translated scripts to introduce
Soviet film theory and the ideas of the Soviet film masters to China. In 1933, Xia Yan argued that Soviet film stood at the forefront of cultural production. He stated that, by following the lead of Lenin's directives on film, combined with Comrade Mao's application of Marxism-Leninism to the Chinese context, China could further develop the guiding principles of Marxist-Leninist cultural theory. This union of Soviet and Chinese experience with revolutionary theory would place art more firmly in the service of the worker, peasant, and soldier (Xia 1985).

By 1949, when the CCP gained control of the means of production (cultural and economic), Soviet film occupied a prominent position in leftist filmic discourse. As evident in the statement by Xia Yan, those associated with the CCP understood development of the film industry in China to be a combination of Soviet film theory, Marxism-Leninism, the leadership of Mao Zedong, and the particularity of Chinese conditions. The Chinese film industry was characterized by concerted international exchange that promoted a particular variant of internationalism based on friendly cooperation, mutual struggle, and a future prosperity. This internationalism found expression in the numerous Soviet films that appeared frequently on Chinese screens. There is a seductive tautology at work here, however. The material reality of the films in China was, on one hand, the result of friendly cooperation between the Soviet Union and China. On the other hand, the very phrases—friendly cooperation, mutual struggle, future prosperity—which the material reality of Soviet films in China presumably substantiated, acquired meaning for Chinese viewers through the films' content and representation, not simply through its presence. Here, then, we need to turn to consideration of the specific content of internationalism promoted by and through Soviet and Chinese film (since Chinese films produced during the Maoist era were influenced by Soviet-style revolutionary film).

A key characteristic of the framing discourse on Soviet film in China that sought to combine international socialism and national circumstances in a unique and progressive manner was a foregrounding of histories based on class-consciousness, socialist struggle, and liberation. This formulation meant that Soviet historical experience, as recreated on the silver screen, occupied a prominent
position in China’s understandings of past, present, and future. As socialist nations, Chinese and Soviet histories were intertwined. Frequent assertions that Soviet film portrayed progressive values, revolutionary struggle, and “China’s tomorrow” constituted the framework within which the Soviet film festival took place each November and Chinese film projection units screened Soviet films throughout the nation. Articles in film journals echoed the temporal and familial language in other propaganda that conjoined China to the Soviet Union and was very much a part of popular consciousness.

Visual imagery featured in posters such as those proclaiming that the “Soviet Union’s Today Is Our Tomorrow” resonated with, for instance, the opening harvest scenes of the hugely popular Soviet Film, *Xingfu de Shenghuo* (The Kuban Cossacks), in which combines moved over the land, grain bins overflowed, and peasant workers happily sang. Soviet and Chinese propagandists embraced this temporal formulation of Sino-Soviet relations (as well as the alternate form of the Soviet Union as China’s older brother). Even as formal Sino-Soviet relations deteriorated in the latter half of the 1950s, articles like “For a Beautiful Tomorrow” (1959) by the secretary of the foreign affairs section of the Soviet youth society, Murtazaev, appeared. This article explicitly linked the future to movements (including new patriotism) inspired by Sino-Soviet cooperation. Undoubtedly, we must pay attention to the shifting political contexts of such utterances and to how these utterances frame the cultural political arena in which Soviet film circulated. Yet we must also consider how consistency, in the domain of the popular, of slogans that associated the (good) Soviet Union with China’s future enabled a malleable internationalism to remain “popular” even across the divide of the Sino-Soviet split at the end of the 1950s. Moreover, we must remember that internationalism referred not only to Sino-Soviet relations; it invoked a utopian vision of an alternatively ordered world order premised on international proletarian revolution as well as the pragmatic politics of a Cold War world in which the strength of nation-states figured prominently. In this context, Soviet feature films were mass entertainment and tools of political education that shaped not only revolutionary consciousness but also understandings of China, the future, and “the global.”
FOSTERING INTERNATIONALIST VISIONS THROUGH FILM

Meng Guangjun, a translation specialist and later head of the foreign film bureau of the China Film Foundation, was the translator for the Chinese film delegation sent to the Soviet Union in 1954. He published an article in the Moscow film journal, *Iskusstvo kino* (Film Art), in which he stated: “Soviet movies are the most advanced and wonderful films in the world. The method of socialist realism allows reflection on the success of communist construction and opens up the inner world of the Soviet people and their moral qualities. . . . For the Chinese people, Soviet movies are not just entertainment but they are life textbooks as well. That is why they are so respected in China.” He followed with: “Watching Soviet movies has become a necessity for Chinese viewers. Remembering that ‘Today’s Soviet Union Is China’s tomorrow,’ Chinese viewers see their lives reflected in the Soviet movies, the prospective development of their motherland, and their own happy lives.”

The power of the Soviet film, Meng Guangjun claimed, is that it showed Chinese viewers what their lives would be like in the future as it encouraged them to understand Chinese nation-building in categories that linked the two socialist nations together.

Moreover, in conversations in 2000 and 2001, Meng Guangjun cited numerous examples in which he believed Chinese viewers took inspiration from the filmed representations of Soviet heroes and heroines to shape their own understanding of how best they could serve the newly established People’s Republic of China. These examples included young soldier Zhang who repeated the heroic act of Alexander Matrosov by using his own body to block enemy fire during the Korean War. Meng Guangjun, who was the principal translator for the first Soviet film dubbed in Chinese in 1950 that told the story of Alexander Matrosov and went by the Chinese title “An Ordinary Soldier,” stressed the popularity of this film on the Korean front. When I asked him about the relationship between anti-German sentiment in Soviet film and the anti-American sentiment fostered by Chinese soldiers in the Korean War, he responded by simply stating that the Chinese understood the similarity of antifascist and anti-American imperialist struggles. Similarly, Chinese understood the anti-German struggles in World War II as the Soviet
equivalent to the anti-Japanese war of resistance of 1937–1945 in China. What is of interest here is how these connections and comparisons were made self-evident with seemingly effortless slippage across time and national boundaries, even as they invoked moments of extreme nationalist militarism.

In the early 1950s, Soviet films dominated the main film journal *Dazhong dianying*. Following the introduction of films, articles of the genre “After I saw ‘X’” appeared either in the same or subsequent issues. The brief firsthand accounts expressed emotional responses to films and the course of action the author/viewer intended to pursue as a result of seeing the film. Jia Hua (1950), a student at a Shanghai girls’ middle school, wrote that watching the Soviet film *Gongke Bailin* [The Fall of Berlin] was like taking a course in politics. She now understood the forces of imperialism. After seeing the German treatment of Russia and the subsequent Russian victory, she recognized the importance of fighting American imperialism in Korea “for protection of our motherland, for consolidation of national defense, for worldwide lasting peace.” Similarly, Xie Zhongde (1953) of the Anwei Cultural Bureau Film Projection Unit reported the deep impression made on farmers by the Soviet film *Tuolajishou* [Tractor Drivers]. The report stressed the enthusiasm with which the Chinese villagers accepted new technology and women’s participation as key components of the prosperity displayed in the film. This was true regardless of age or gender. The article mentioned three different responses: a seventy-two-year-old woman who did not understand socialism before seeing the film and gained an appreciation for the new life possible under socialism; the mutual aid team chief who did not believe that the Soviet Union could be so advanced and learned from the film that tractors were abundant on Soviet farms; and a women’s representative who saw how women could drive tractors in a socialist society and thereby raise the level and lifestyle of the mutual aid team. Moreover, Xie Zhongde, the author of the article, clearly articulated the connection between the Soviet Union as portrayed in the film and China by using the commonplace formulation of the Soviet present as China’s future. He stated: “not only did the peasants see in the film the happy and prosperous life of the worker in a socialist country but even more deeply they realized that today’s Soviet Union was their new China’s tomorrow.”
Numerous short pieces such as these appeared in each issue of *Dazhong dianying*. The emotional reactions to Soviet films expressed in these pieces established a ratified political discourse through which the films were to be understood in the Chinese context (Chen “Propagating the Propaganda Film,” 2003). Audience responses to Soviet film as presented in articles of the above genre stressed the relevance of Soviet films to the Chinese revolution and nation building, embedding Soviet film in everyday experience and rendering it significant at the popular level. Here we need to consider how the CCP mobilized popular culture materials to promote the Soviet Union as a comparative historical category. As Ann Stoler (2001) argues with respect to practices of colonial comparison, analyzing the history and politics of comparison in order to politicize the history of comparison allows us to consider how “category making produced . . . equivalencies that allowed for international conferences and convinced their participants . . . that they were in the same conversations, if not always talking about the same thing” (paragraph 88). If we replace “international conferences” with “international cultural exchange” and “participants” with “viewers,” we can appreciate internationalism as constitutive of Chinese citizenship and identity. In the context of 1950s China, a focus on socialist comparison expressed via popular culture provides a vantage point from which to explore how Chinese citizens who lived their entire lives within China—few of whom even had access to the cosmopolitan existence of larger cities such as Shanghai and Guangzhou—imagined themselves as part of a common struggle with the Soviet Union. In order to move toward such an understanding I will consider two ways in which Soviet film was integrated into the everyday lives of Chinese citizens: first, the intertwining of revolutionary narrative and national narrative through film; second, the appeal of visual claims to socialist prosperity.

**REVOLUTIONARY NARRATIVE MEETS NATIONAL NARRATIVE**

Materials used to introduce Soviet films to Chinese audiences reinforced the relevance and appeal of Soviet film to China. These materials singled out themes such as future prosperity, freedom, and
national glory that were familiar to Chinese consumers of reportage literature, news, and other media. Articles discussing Gongke Bailin (The Fall of Berlin), for instance, first described the film as a superb example of socialist realism that had duly received worldwide acclaim. In its subsequent summary of the plot, the article invoked the tropes of light and darkness to set off Nazi Germany from the triumphant scenes of Stalin in Berlin (Sheng 1950). Another article emphasized the superior performance of the female protagonist, who movingly showed that women’s patriotism and defense of the motherland could be as heroic as men’s. In this article, the author emphasized the importance of a committed heart in the struggle against Germany and for the larger revolutionary movement (Lin Ying 1950).

Similar to other major Soviet feature films, the framing of The Fall of Berlin drew out the nationalist fervor that inspired acts of heroism, perseverance, and sacrifice while it also insisted that these acts not remain particularized. Articles presented the film as one that resonated with progressive audiences internationally because these audiences recognized the common historical struggle that fueled nationalist militarism directed against fascism and imperialism. Because, these materials argued, the Soviet victory was a victory for socialism, Stalin’s triumph in Berlin should be read, in the Chinese context, through the lens of the establishment of socialism in China. A direct link, mediated by the common thread of socialist struggle, emerged between Soviet nationalism in World War II and CCP-guided Chinese nationalism in the Civil War period. Mao Zedong’s liberation of China and Stalin’s liberation of Berlin shared a common historical trajectory.

In addition to the linkages forged by staff writers for major newspapers between national and revolutionary history in China and the Soviet Union, audience members and readers also wrote in to Dazhong dianying to share their reactions to Soviet films. They often detailed the inspiration they took from representations of Soviet armed conflict with Germany in World War I and II. Films such as Putong Yibing (Alexander Matrosov), the first film translated and dubbed in the PRC, instilled a spirit of self-sacrifice in Chinese viewers and their counterparts on the frontlines in Korea. In January 1952 CPV soldier Lin Luohua (1952) wrote to explain to readers the film situation at the Korean War front. He stressed the emotional impact of films and expressed appreciation for documentaries and feature
films. In particular, he singled out war films, including the Soviet films *Gongke Bailin* (The Fall of Berlin), *Xiabaiyang* (Chapayev), and *Ta zai baowei zuguo* (She Defends the Motherland). He claimed that he and his fellow soldiers could watch these films over and over because these films reinforced the meaning of the Korean War and strengthened their commitment.

The importance of Soviet film for Chinese People’s Volunteer (CPV) soldiers is significant to our consideration of the meaning of mutual struggle expressed and experienced through Soviet film in China. Soviet films as viewed by CPV soldiers existed at the nexus of popular culture, nationalist militarism, and internationalist experience. With the exception of a few documentaries released in 1951 and 1952, no feature films about the Korean War in China were made by Chinese studios during the period of the war (Sun 2001). As a result, the experience was culturally mediated primarily through representations of struggles with different spatio-temporal locations. Yet difference did not mean irrelevance. On the contrary, the coupling of Chinese Anti-Japanese War-of-Resistance films with Soviet anti-fascist films in the historical moment of the Korean War, simultaneously mobilized synchronic and diachronic relations between the three nations and their socialist struggles. CPV soldiers fighting in Korea and those who supported them made sense of the military engagement not only through the lens of Chinese civil war and anti-Japanese struggle, but also through Soviet World War II films. The use of filmed representations of armed struggle in these related historical moments created a progression of socialist states struggling for existence. The expansion of worldwide struggle, premised on national liberation movements, moved from the Bolshevik revolution to the liberation of China and finally to the desired freedom of Korea. Moreover, the focus on Stalin rather than Lenin contributed to the futuristic representation of the Soviet Union for CPV soldiers. Unlike films such as *Lenin in 1918* (1939) and *Lenin in October* (1939) that glorified the persona of Lenin, Soviet World War II films, particularly *The Fall of Berlin*, made no direct reference to Lenin. These representations of Stalin functioned to remind audiences that socialism in the Soviet Union was no longer in its foundational stages (associated with Lenin) but in a more mature stage, one that Chinese and Korean viewers aspired to reach.
Even as this distinction emerged and denied coevality to Chinese and Soviet socialism by glorifying the maturity of Soviet socialism, Lenin films continued to circulate alongside Stalin films. The simultaneous screening of these films, and their specific historical content, reinforced the longer history of Soviet socialism and its foundational position for all socialist struggles worldwide. The films, often overlaid with a sentimental story of love, struggle, and war, also worked to embody revolution through an emphasis on the leaders of revolution. In this manner, Soviet films fostered commitment to the revolutionary leaders as Lenin, Stalin, or Mao Zedong beamed down at audiences from silver screens. The glorification of leaders introduced another temporal dimension to Sino-Soviet cultural discourse. Successful socialist struggles waged in 1918, 1945, and 1949 by Lenin, Stalin, and Mao, respectively, reminded the viewer that the enemy constantly threatened and that the struggles, while historically specific, were elements of a larger ongoing common struggle. The struggles in Europe and Asia represented on movie screens contributed to a comparative mode of viewing film and conceptualizing the global in which audience members were encouraged to identify similarities between socialist nations not only because of similar historical trajectories, but because of their shared struggle against retrograde ideologies, including fascism, capitalism, and imperialism. Soviet films functioned in the Korean War context to remind CPV soldiers and Chinese citizens that they were engaged in a common struggle with Korea and that the Chinese revolution only had meaning within this larger context. The same films reminded Chinese viewers of this synchronic relationship between socialisms in China and the Soviet Union.

On one hand, revolutionary narratives featured prominently as a means to integrate through the theme of mutual struggle, Soviet film, the Korean War effort, and Chinese nationalist and internationalist aims. On the other hand, in a peace context, audience members’ correspondence indicate that they looked to Soviet film not only as inspiration for an internationalist-inspired nationalistic militarism, but for display and promise of the socialist good life. Future prosperity comprised another component of the internationalism shaped and experienced through film consumption. On this theme, letters from audience members focused on abundant harvests, improved gender relations, mechanization of farming, more consumer goods, and even
better access to films. Some viewers brought together the diverse elements associated with future prosperity when they reported, for example, that they associated filmed depictions of female tractor drivers in the Soviet Union with increased harvests in China if developments similar to the USSR in gender relations and modernization were implemented in China. Liang Jun, new China’s first female tractor driver, was among those inspired by the Soviet films Sulian Nuyingxiong Zho (Zoya) (1944), Baowei Zugo (She Defends Her Country) (1943), and Gangtie shi zemn yang lianchengde? (How the Steel Was Tempered) (1942) (Quanguo Nongmingbing 1950, 2). These films moved her to ask how she might become a female hero like those in the Soviet films. She decided to attend tractor-driving school in Dongbei and by 1950 the Chinese press widely publicized Liang Jun’s personal accomplishments as well as her creation of a women’s tractor unit. The propaganda and publicity surrounding model workers such as Liang Jun then formed the setting within which Chinese audiences viewed in 1951 the newly dubbed Soviet film Tractor Drivers (1939). Young women throughout China took inspiration from Liang Jun and the Soviet film as they entered new lines of work as train conductors and tractor drivers. As the stories about these Chinese women circulated in the press, more women rushed to join their ranks in newly established women’s tractor units or train conductor classes. As a result, by 1953 when films such as Tractor Drivers spread to the countryside, the Soviet filmic text acquired a Chinese reality refracted through individual action and propaganda materials. In this manner Soviet films became embedded in the popular consciousness of the Chinese masses.17

In the above example, we see how Soviet films appealed to the desires of the audience by promising a future that was in the process of being realized.18 Many looked to film for reinforcement that this future would in fact be realized. One reader of Dazhong Dianying wrote to the editor to discuss the discrepancy between the legal emancipation of women, continued constraints and gender inequities, and the underdeveloped consciousness of women (“Xiwang paishe funu wenti de yingpian” 1950, 19). She felt that filmmakers should focus on women’s emancipation in order to raise women’s consciousness and advance women’s emancipation beyond a mere legality. Here, again, Soviet film provided the lead in representing a fuller realization
of socialist promises. In 1953, *Dazhong dianying* gathered a set of firsthand accounts by young women under the title “Study the Progressive Women on the Silver Screen.” All three women in this article discussed specific Soviet films with reference to specific themes: the nationalist militaristic theme of *Tù zài báowéi zúguò* (She Defends the Motherland); the good life of *Xìngfù de Shèngguó* (The Kuban Cosacks); and self-sacrifice for the revolution of *Xiāngcūn nujiaoshi* (A Village Schoolteacher). These women were not alone in the inspiration they claimed to have taken from specific Soviet films. Many others claimed that films like *A Village Schoolteacher* inspired them to enact the spirit of serving others exemplified by the protagonist (Xìng yín múshāng de xíanjìn fùnú xuéxí 1953, 4–5). One, using the pseudonym “Yīng” (Hero), wrote about how teachers corrected their thought as a result of seeing the film (Yīng 1952); others, including the comrades of Sichuan cultural workers Hán Liwén and Bì Xīng, went to the countryside to teach.

The relative frequency with which emancipated women featured in Soviet films about work and partisan heroism integrated women’s emancipation into the filmic discourse. It also “demonstrated” the success of socialist gender practices because the Soviet filmed reality was taken by Chinese audiences to be a reality on which they could build their own future. The filmic experience combined utopian ideals, Soviet socialist realism, and the Chinese future. Chinese reviews and articles on the films suggested that, given the proper outlet for the emotions stirred up by the films, the filmed Soviet reality would soon be China’s practiced reality. The familial language that placed the Soviet Union and China within the same socialist family reinforced a hierarchy of maturation between the two nations. At the same time, it diminished anxiety over national identity formation within a cultural realm dominated by Soviet products. The spatio-temporal discourse governing mass political culture allowed the images seen on the screen to become the material basis for Chinese nation building rather than a challenge to the nation. In this manner, images of perseverance and prosperity achieved through aestheti-
cized portrayals of socialist values also became part of the internationalism produced by the presence of Soviet films in China.

Soviet film acquired further meaning at the popular level for its association with modernization and mechanization. This occurred
through two means: the imagery on the screen that promised a future of plenty occasioned by collectivization; and the framing of film itself. Unlike opera, theater, folksongs, posters, art, newspapers, and radio that were old forms given new content by the CCP, mass national distribution of film was new. Contrary to theories and projects promulgated by Qu Qiubai and Feng Xuereng that promoted infusing new content into old forms such as ballads, the CCP championed film as novel technology (Qu 1985, 456–61; Li 2001). The film projector as mechanical device signified the arrival of modernity. This modernity mobilized a discourse that fetishized machinery and invoked linear frameworks of progress that complemented the notion that the Soviet Union was China’s tomorrow. Access to film technology shaped the everyday experience of modernity in the PRC and helped determine one’s location along revolutionary and national trajectories. For instance, in the 1951 campaign against The Life of Wu Xun, playwright and nominal director of the Shanghai Culture Bureau, Xia Yan (1951), engaged in self-criticism by using historical analogies to compare the development of the Chinese film industry with the development of the nation. He argued that the film industry was still in the united front stage, a stage already surpassed by six years in terms of national history. The artistic-literary community therefore needed to progress quickly to fulfill its full potential and serve the nation and its people. Learning from and making use of the Soviet film industry would enable such progress. Using a diachronic conceptualization of technology transfer, the CCP thus explicitly linked modernization to the presence of modern machines and mastery of them. For film projection units, this meant displaying and explaining their equipment (often imported from the Soviet Union) upon arrival in villages and in minority regions (Chen, “Propagating the Propaganda Film” 2003). It also meant writing about the role of Soviet “brothers” in one’s training in film technology (for example Wu 1950). The experience of modernity constructed through these practices then became linked to the film screenings made possible by these novel machines and the Soviet products, knowledge, and people involved.

Two Soviet organizations, the All Union Society for Contacts Abroad (VOKS) and the Chinese-Soviet Friendship Society (CSFS), played central roles in delivering equipment and training Chinese
film personnel. This included the delivery of 16mm projectors and electric generators that enabled screenings in rural areas by mobile projection units. In 1951, Central CSFS detailed that, nationwide, they had created 54 projection teams using 16mm projections and 152 teams working with 35mm projectors. The combined effect of modernity in China, therefore, was inextricably intertwined with the Soviet Union as exemplar and transmitter of “China’s tomorrow.” In this way Soviet film and its accoutrements furthered the practices and rhetoric of proletarian internationalism by creating links between Soviet and Chinese revolutionary and national narratives of development and modernization trajectories. Friendly cooperation, on one level, meant that villagers throughout China could see films.

Soviet-sponsored lectures and exhibits that accompanied film screenings further reinforced the ideal that the Soviet Union and China were engaged in a common global struggle premised upon friendly cooperation in which the Soviet Union occupied the position of “older brother” and represented China’s future. Reports from VOKS and CSFS demonstrate the importance from the Soviet side that Soviet film be situated within this revolutionary framework, a framework that linked Chinese socialism and modernity to the Soviet Union via proletarian internationalism. A 1949 report on screenings in Dalian referred to short political speeches between screenings and to several photo exhibits in the lobby. At the same time, however, the report expressed concern with the low level of media and political work among the population. Similarly, reports criticized the political level of those who introduced films in Dalian and Port Arthur. Presumably referring to projectionists, the report asserted that they lacked knowledge of the film and were insufficiently prepared when making explanatory comments. Significantly, these critical comments were not about knowledge of the film narrative or stylistic conventions, for example, but were about how the films were politicized and made relevant to Chinese viewers.

Having outlined, albeit briefly, how propaganda from the Soviet Union and China conceptualized Soviet filmed historical struggles as integral to Chinese national history and modernization, allow me also to draw attention to the implications for cooperation within the revolutionary struggle. Framing the relationship between Chinese viewers and Soviet film in terms of the Soviet Union as the benevolent
older brother inserts a hierarchical dimension to the experience of proletarian internationalism. The very unevenness of global forces ensured that the Soviet Union was embedded within Chinese national projects, as is evident from Chinese reliance on Soviet products, films, and expertise. Only through Soviet commitment to the Chinese national film industry could film projection units perform their jobs. The extreme shortage of films and projectors, as well as the lack of Chinese technical expertise, meant that exchange of film materiel entered the conceptualization and experience of internationalism in 1950s China. At this level, internationalism became cemented to modernity, its uneven effects as well as its promised arrival.

**LONG LIVE LENIN, LONG LIVE STALIN:**
**FAITH IN SOVIET FILM BEYOND THE 1950S**

The leaps of faith that brought Soviet film directly into the everyday lives and concerns of Chinese citizens reflected robust propagandizing of the special relationship between the Soviet Union and China and the rendering everyday of a historical narrative of revolutionary struggle. Articles introducing film content and audience response simplified the message and impact of Soviet film to its essential components, even as they reiterated the conclusions of theoretical treatises on art and culture, Sino-Soviet relations, and international socialism. But, unlike theoretical and political statements as well as visual culture (in the form of the propaganda poster), which by the mid-1950s were preoccupied with the differences between Chinese and Soviet socialism, articles concerning Soviet film rarely belabored the relevance of Soviet film to China. Negotiations over the films to be shown occurred at the bureaucratic level: between the Chinese Film Bureau and Sovexportfilm in the 1950s or the Soviet Trade Mission (aided by the All Union Society of Contacts Abroad [VOKS] and the Chinese-Soviet Friendship Society [CSFS]) in the 1960s. Their disagreements over the suitability of specific films did not generally feature in the mass media. As a result, a positive, if selective, portrayal of Soviet films continued through the 1960s. The number of new Soviet films imported into China dropped dramatically after 1957, and those screened in the 1960s tended to be Stalinist classics rather
than newly produced films. Nevertheless, the representation of these Soviet films as intimately connected to Chinese socialism and its internationalist claims continued to contribute to a cultural experience in which people consumed the Soviet Union and internationalism via Soviet films. In the 1960s, this form of cultural consumption invoked a double-edged internationalism that worked to consolidate particular aspects of Sino-Soviet connections while distancing others in order to assert China’s leadership of worldwide proletarian revolution. The visual promises of socialism delivered through Soviet film to the Chinese populace featured in this reterritorialization of revolution. I would like to specifically consider how, through appropriation of Soviet film in the name of internationalism, Soviet film in China promoted historical movement from the Soviet Union under Lenin and Stalin to Chinese socialism. The resultant historical narrative and its cultural representation functioned to critique Soviet-style socialism in the 1960s as Soviet film and specific Soviet leaders, hero(ine)s, and film stars were naturalized in the Chinese context.

Up to this point, I have concentrated on the ways revolutionary values located within specific nationalist moments conjoined Soviet and Chinese histories. The extent to which these ideas became embedded in the popular domain across time through visual means remains to be considered. In contrast to scholars who argue that the appeal of Soviet film was limited because of the audience’s lack of familiarity with Soviet society, I suggest that this distance rendered the films more relevant to the Chinese revolutionary project. The Soviet Union, for Chinese viewers, was that which they saw on the silver screen. Seeing, in this case, was believing.26 The representatives at the Shanxi model workers meeting in 1953 watched the documentary film “Chinese Workers Representatives in the Soviet Union” and felt that this gave them a chance to see the Soviet Union and really be convinced of the goodness of the Soviet Union (Niu 1952). With reference to feature films, one interviewee, a seventy-year-old woman who was a member of the Art department of the Chengdu Cultural Bureau during the 1950s and 1960s, described her experience in the following manner. “Even though life was very difficult in the 1950s and 1960s, we were young and it didn’t matter to us because we believed in people like Bao’er [Pavel Korchagin, the protagonist of How the Steel Was Tempered] and the changes that they could bring
about. We also believed in the prosperous society of the Soviet Union. Despite hardness of life, life during this period was very inspired and ardent (re’ai), just like the heroine in *A Village Schoolteacher*. So for this reason we very much received the influence of Soviet films and believed in the life that was being portrayed.”27 Similarly, another interviewee, a member of the CCP Art and Literature Unit in Chengdu since 1955, responded to my query as to whether, during the Great Leap Forward, people had less faith in Soviet films and the image of the socialist future it portrayed, because it was clearly at odds with their personal experiences of socialism. He stated that, at this time, there was no change in the people’s feelings toward Soviet film because the present difficulties were due to problems with the Maoist line. The Soviet future thus could exist, and they could still believe in it.28

Liao Peiyin and Hao Deqi, both film projectionists in Chengdu, Sichuan, during the 1960s, also elaborated on the specific role of Soviet film in their work, even though both became film projectionists at the time when formal Sino-Soviet cooperation was breaking down.29 They remembered seeing large numbers of Soviet films, particularly ones associated with the Assist Korea, Resist America campaign of 1950–53. They asserted that people warmly welcomed Soviet films because the films were of higher artistic level and because the Soviet Union was China’s tomorrow. Yet, by the 1960s and the Cultural Revolution, when the number of film projection units peaked, Soviet films were rare except for documentaries and standards like *Lenin in 1918* and *Lenin in October*. When asked about differences between showing Soviet films in 1950s and 1960s, given the radical change in government relations, they and their colleague Zhou Xueqi insisted that, while official Sino-Soviet relations were no longer close, Soviet film still was important. The people liked to see them and were influenced by them. Zhou, Liao, and Hao all distinguished between cultural influence and formal government relations, even as they claimed that, during the Cultural Revolution, they did not show Soviet films or other foreign films. Similarly, Zhang Yarong, Manager of the Chengdu Film Distribution and Projection Group, and Zhong Gongyi, Assistant Manager, informed me that they felt that, even after the Sino-Soviet split, the common people received the cultural influence of the Soviet Union through film. Zhang and
Zhong also distinguished between government criticism of Soviet policy and leadership and the heroes of the Soviet films that continued to circulate.  

For these film workers, Soviet film was not categorically different from the Chinese films that they also took to the people. They praised the superior quality of Soviet films in the early 1950s but insisted upon the similarity of themes emphasized in Chinese and Soviet films throughout the 1950s and 1960s. They singled out themes of heroism and overcoming hardship while also referring to Soviet films like *Xingfu Shenghuo* (The Kuban Cossacks), which offered—in addition to heroism, partisanship, and perseverance—a compelling vision of the future prosperity promised by socialism. Generally, these film workers did not consider Soviet films to occupy a privileged position above Chinese films. Rather, they showed Soviet films alongside Chinese films to audiences who enjoyed both because of their novelty, political relevance, entertainment, and limited availability. But by the 1960s, the Sino-Soviet split fundamentally altered the context within which these films were seen, as well as the meanings of perseverance, heroism, partisanship, and the good life as manifestations of internationalism.

When Sovexportfilm closed its offices in China in 1960, the Soviet Trade Mission assumed responsibility for film distribution, placing it institutionally alongside the import and export of books, periodicals, and other print materials. In November 1966, the Soviet Council of Ministers ratified the creation of an Interdepartmental Film Selection Commission that selected films for free exhibition abroad. In addition to film distribution, this Commission also oversaw the editing of its films, including dubbing, voice-overs, and content. The continued circulation of Soviet film in China under the Soviet Trade Mission reminds us that, in the altered political conditions of the 1960s, the socialist future remained intimately tied to Soviet portrayals of revolutionary fervor and the socialist good life. The year 1953, marked by the completion of China’s economic reconstruction in 1952 as well as the death of Stalin in 1953, was the highpoint in Sino-Soviet cooperation and film distribution. By the mid-1950s, the share of Soviet film screen days dropped to 35–40 percent from 65–70 percent in 1951–1952. As the PRC introduced quotas in the late 1950s and began to control Sovexportfilm’s data collection, the statistics collected
by China’s Board of Film Distribution became an official document upon which both sides based their decisions. This shifted the power balance between the two sides, as China asserted its autonomy in the realm of film imports and distribution. Moreover, by the mid-1950s, particularly with the launching of the Great Leap Forward in 1958, Chinese-produced films increased exponentially. By the early 1960s, then, new Soviet films had a much less important position in everyday political culture relative to Chinese films. Control of Soviet film was also more pronounced. The Interdepartmental Film Selection Commission and the Soviet embassy replaced Sovexportfilm in managing film distribution in China, while the Chinese dictated film selection. Ideological differences accompanied a renewed Chinese national film industry. But within the context of the emerging Sino-Soviet split, the decrease in new Soviet feature films entering China in some ways rendered those Soviet films that were shown in China more relevant to the experience and meaning of internationalism, not less.

The dramatic shift is evident in the fate of the annual film festival. By 1961, with the forty-third anniversary of the October Revolution, only ten Soviet films were shown during the festival in Shanghai. In a meeting between G. Grushetskii, first secretary of the Soviet embassy, and Bai Yan, general secretary of the Shanghai branch of CSFS, at which they discussed the festival films, Bai Yan mentioned in passing that the most popular films were Lenin films.35 Anecdotal evidence suggests that, by the 1960s, very few new Soviet films appeared in the PRC because the CCP preferred to show classics such as Lenin in 1918 and Lenin in October. Moreover, the ways in which ideological differences informed Sino-Soviet film exchange became increasingly evident. With the 1965 festival dedicated to victory over Nazi Germany, only films made in the Stalinist era were shown, including Stalinist productions banned in the Soviet Union under Krushchev. Contrary to common perception that Soviet cultural products were withdrawn with a speed and efficiency similar to the withdrawal of experts and industrial factories, we see in the example of film that Soviet products were selectively deployed as tools in an ideological struggle over the meaning of socialism and internationalism. Unlike when American films were banned during the Korean War, Soviet films were not entirely removed from the
Chinese cultural and political landscape. Instead, Soviet films were used in the ideological struggle, as Stalinist films acquired new meanings within the USSR and China in the 1960s. For example, exhortations to study Soviet heroes like Alexander Matrosov appeared in 1960, using the same promotional photograph and description as had circulated with its initial Chinese release in 1950. At this moment, however, the enemy was no longer confined to the German, Japanese, or American fascism or imperialism; the enemy included revisionist tendencies within the socialist bloc. The martyrdom of Matrosov acquired new meaning as vigilance against the internal enemy emerged as a central theme of the late 1950s and 1960s. The internationalism thus was not about following the lead of the Soviet Union, but reminding all of the danger of Soviet-style deviation from revolutionary history. Even though the films shown to Chinese audiences were similar in the 1950s and the 1960s, audiences consumed these films within the altered context of de-Stalinization and deteriorating Sino-Soviet relations.

The Sino-Soviet split required a reinterpretation of internationalism as it was promoted through film. Popular Soviet films in China no longer presented a universalized socialist future to be realized in particular form on both Soviet and Chinese soil. Rather these films presented a particular socialism appropriated by the CCP to challenge the revisionist tendencies Mao Zedong identified in Krushchev’s policies. The pairing of revolutionary and national narratives that made Soviet films relevant to the Chinese context in the 1950s was no longer the lens through which Chinese viewers understood the future. Krushchev’s Soviet Union, after all, was the antithesis, not the embodiment, of China’s future. In the 1960s many of the same films shown in the 1950s under the byline “The Soviet Union Is China’s Tomorrow” now functioned to inspire self-sacrifice for the revolution and ensured that struggle against revisionism within China, in the Soviet Union, and internationally was part of the experience of cultural consumption. In this context, these films also suggested an alternative vision of “the global.” The historical trajectory linking Lenin, Stalin, and Mao Zedong continued to exist but, with the new framing in the 1960s, Mao Zedong appeared as the distillation of the most advanced socialism rather than the pupil or younger brother of Lenin and Stalin. The cult of Mao largely replaced the cult
of Stalin even as the cult of Stalin was used to criticize contemporary Soviet policy. In this framework, the Soviet Union assumed a foundational position in international socialism, but China now stood at the forefront. For this to happen, the Soviet Union and its filmed representations needed to be present at the level of popular culture as comparative historical category, consumable vision, and politico-aesthetic ideal. It remained a key conceptual category through which socialism, modernity, internationalism, and revolution were experienced, even though the meaning and experience of these categories was contested.

**CONCLUSION**

The practice of viewing Soviet movies in 1950s China situated Chinese citizens within a cultural, political, and aesthetic framework of modernization and worldwide socialist revolution. The socialist modernity produced in China rested upon Maoist precepts and policies interwoven with Soviet film stars, socialist realist visions of prosperity, and new media technologies. The experience of modernity and internationalism in the first decade of the People’s Republic of China was mediated by film projectors, their operators, and the “electric shadows” that danced across makeshift screens across the country. All of these aspects of film—technology, personnel, product—absorbed considerable Soviet influence, an influence proudly proclaimed as evidence of Sino-Soviet friendship, a new geopolitical positioning of China, and a realization of proletarian internationalism. In the early Maoist period, promotion of international cinema invoked a Cold War topography in which socialist and democratic countries understood themselves as a bloc united against American imperialism and its propaganda, including “eye-candy” bourgeois cinema. In China, this geopolitical conceptualization infused territorial claims to nationhood with modernization discourse and transnational cultural configurations. It was, on the one hand, the materialization of an ideological struggle and, on the other hand, a lived experience of cultural consumption.

The lived experience of Chinese citizens in rural and urban areas of 1950s China included new technologies of mass communication
that promoted Soviet achievements and valor as harbingers of Chinese socialist success. As Mao Zedong promoted the notion of leaning to one side, CCP cadres across the nation extolled the Soviet example. A mobilization report in 1952 by Ye Jianying, Chairman of the Guangdong Provincial People’s Government, stated:

Under the present circumstances one’s attitude towards the Soviet Union is the criterion to judge who is an internationalist and who is not. Anyone opposing the Soviet Union is a counter-revolutionary and will go to the enemy side. Chairman Mao has told us to lean to the side of the Soviet Union. At the same time we must love our nation and our people.37

Within this context, CCP propaganda units and materials actively promoted Soviet heroes and their filmed representation as models for emulation in socialist construction of China. During the Korean War, Chinese People’s Volunteer soldiers steeled themselves for battle by watching Alexander Matrosov (Putong Yibing). CPV soldiers reported that viewing the film on the frontlines helped them find within themselves the spirit of martyrdom. On a less militaristic level, China’s first female tractor driver, Liang Jun, decided to enter tractor driver school in a class of seventy men after seeing women driving tractors in the Soviet film Tractor Drivers. Other women and men sought to repeat the actions of the heroine of A Village Schoolteacher through a commitment to promoting education to the masses. Many others applied the values of perseverance, ideological commitment, and self-sacrifice embodied by Pavel Korchagin, Gorky, and Chapayev in the extremely popular films How the Steel Was Tempered, Gorky’s Childhood, and Chapayev.38 Through the screening of these films, Soviet characters like Matrosov, Korchagin, Gorky, and Chapayev became household names in China. They signified to film audiences the spirit and promise of socialism as they embodied and gave meaning to popular slogans promoting friendly cooperation, mutual struggle, and future prosperity as central components of proletarian internationalism.

Soviet experience, expertise, plot lines, and images thus occupied an influential position in communist China’s new national culture as well as common Chinese understandings of socialism and its world historical role. Furthermore, the impact of the films moved beyond inspirational tales of revolutionary heroism; it included a restructuring
of time and space commensurate with a world revolutionary era. The “novel thing” of film reconstituted the spaces of everyday life as village squares, fields, and rural factories were transformed into cinematic arenas capable of linking lives to international historical movements such as the Bolshevik Revolution, antifascist struggle, and collectivization. To this end, Soviet film captured the imagination of policy makers, Party leadership, and citizens as it promoted a unity between socialist citizens across borders.

By refocusing attention on the consumptive angle of internationalism, approached through the lens of Soviet film in 1950s China, we have seen how socialist modernity was more than a form of new social practice. We can also analyze this modernity as a layering of historical times and places that constituted the experience of proletarian internationalism. By Harry Harootunian, in his discussion of Walter Benjamin, refers to modernity, and its everyday existence and experience, as “the site where the past is always situated in the present and where differing forms of historical consciousness constantly commingle and interact. That is, modernity is not only a distinct form of experience stemming from new social practices but also a ‘decisive mutation of historical experiences,’ which accordingly ‘produces a range of possible temporalizations’ and the certainty for ‘competition or struggle’ between them in everyday life” (2000, 105). In Maoist China, consumption of Soviet film drew Chinese audiences into a complex web of temporalizations through which Chinese, Soviet, and international socialism acquired meaning.

The interpolation of Soviet film into Chinese socialist experience linked aesthetics, politics, emotion, and modernity. The “everyday internationalism” produced and mediated by Soviet film and film projection units in 1950s China was a combination of several elements: shared ideological commitment to socialist values expressed via individual perseverance, belief in the prosperity and happy future promised by socialism, conceptualization of geopolitics in Cold War terms that saw socialist countries united against the bourgeois capitalist bloc, valorization of mass culture, availability and mastery of modern technology, diachronic and synchronic understandings of China’s national struggle as global struggle, and emotional and potentially occidentalist attachment to Soviet film stars. Together, these elements merged in various patterns with different
emphases to create a political culture in which internationalism assumed meaning through Soviet films and the propaganda apparatus that supported them. This internationalism was shaped not only by geopolitical relations and state ideology, but also through the lived experiences and multiple concepts through which Soviet film assumed and retained relevance for Chinese people. In this process, we may say that the internationalism of the early 1950s that emphasized friendly cooperation, mutual struggle, and future prosperity underwent a narrowing process so that, by the 1960s, internationalism meant struggle. Significantly, in both moments, contests between Mao Zedong and Krushchev over the correct unfolding of revolutionary and national narratives assured that Soviet film delivered, represented, and mediated an unstable but centrally important internationalist experience.

Notes

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1. *Nongjia le* does not appear on the list of imported films for this period and it is unclear what Russian film it refers to. The translation here is from the Chinese title.

2. For similar dynamics in Korea, see Armstrong 2003.

3. On Mao Zedong’s distrust of Stalin, see Goncharov, Lewis, and Xue 1993.

4. The concept of the politico-aesthetic ideal and its importance in Mao’s China is drawn from Wang 1997.

6. Pravda, in an article by the General Secretary of the Chinese-Soviet Friendship Society, reported that, during this period (1949–1957), 289 Soviet movies were shown in Chinese movie theaters to a total audience of 1.615 million.

7. The conceptualization of the October Revolution as a means to bring together the revolutionary struggles as synchronic events is characteristic of the Chinese Soviet Friendship Society (CSFS). It finds expression in statements made at the proceedings of the 1927 Congress of friendship groups at which the International Association of Friends of the Soviet Union (FSU) was formed. At this congress, Will Lawther, the British leader, stated: “I think that I express the desire of all attending this Congress when I call upon all delegates on their return home to proclaim ‘Hail to the October Revolution,’ but also to conduct an inspired and resolute struggle for the preparation of the World October” (quoted in Nemzer 1949, 267).

8. The price of tickets prevented some from attending the cinema as often as they desired. Letters to the editor of Dazhong dianying commenting on the ticket prices occurred regularly in the 1950s. Also, the popular magazine carried various cartoons poking fun at those who would go to extremes to secure discounted student tickets or other related fiascoes. However, Li Xiaozhen, a translator of Soviet film theory in the 1950s, recalls that the price of theater tickets was quite low, five mao, and by walking to school rather than taking the bus, she could afford to go to the movies on the way home and then run home for dinner. The CCP did not follow the Soviet practice of using ticket revenues for popular feature films in the theater to offset costs of more “politically inspired” works, thereby avoiding the class divisions within urban areas in terms of film viewing (interview with Li Xiaozhen and Meng Guangjun, July 6, 2000. Beijing).

9. VOKS (All Union Society for Contacts Abroad) and Soviet government agencies seemed particularly concerned with film work in Xinjiang, as they complained that the Chinese government was not doing enough in this region.

10. Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (hereafter GARF), f. 5283, op. 18, d. 155, l. 216.

11. GARF, f. 5283, op. 18, d. 159, l. 180.


13. This summary of early Soviet film in China is compiled from information in Yan 2000.


15. Notably, Soviet film also influenced Chinese viewers through Chinese-produced films that echoed Soviet themes and whose directors and producers were schooled in Soviet film theory. For example, S. Gerasimov (1956) reported that the protagonist of the Chinese film Exploit, Jian Lian, had a fate that reminded the viewer of Soviet soldier Alexander Matrosov. Gerasimov studied painting and theater design before becoming an actor. He later was one of the most important
directors in the Soviet Union. As a professor at the All-Union State Film Institute (VGIK), he headed the directors’ faculty and also the actors’ studio. More than half the most significant postwar directors and actors of the Soviet cinema were taught by Gerasimov.

16. For Mao Zedong’s articulation of the link between Sino-Soviet cultural exchange and the anti-Japanese War of Resistance, see Peng 1955, chapter 3.


19. In the issue in which this letter appeared, Dazhong dianying included a discussion of the Chinese-produced film as well as numerous Soviet films. One can assume that the letter and content were meant to demonstrate how film in China served the people, their needs, and their desires.

20. Interview with Han Liwen and Bi Xing, Chengdu, Sichuan, July 25, 2002.

21. CSFS Beijing, draft report of 1951, GARF, f. 5283, op. 18, d. 130, l. 119. The number of teams working with 35mm projectors is not definite because of the poor legibility of the document.

22. Garf, f. 5283, op. 18, d. 79, l. 61.


24. See, for example, Zhou Enlai (1950), “The fruitful experience of studying Soviet film makes (us) even better able to serve the people.”

26. The practice of using cultural commentary to launch political campaigns was a feature of Maoist China. Although criticism of Soviet films did appear occasionally, they were not used as springboards for broader anti-Krushchev campaigns. In this manner, the use of Soviet film was more subtle in that the reliance on Stalinist films and refusal to screen “thaw era” films acted as critique.

26. Here we see a parallel with Soviet cinefication. Village agitators reported that, during the Civil War, merely showing moving images of Lenin and Trotsky as well as demonstrations in the city was effective because they made the Bolshevist more real to the peasants. In both the Soviet and Russian countryside, film offered visions of an alternative reality as they portrayed a life and world different from their own. See Kenez 2001, 79.

27. Interview with Han Liwen and Bi Xing, Chengdu, Sichuan, July 25, 2002.


31. Availability greatly differentiates the urban from the rural experience. In urban areas, audience response can be gauged, in some part, by ticket sales because they chose particular films over others. In rural areas, with the extremely limited number of films, audience numbers do not tell us whether or not the film was deemed enjoyable. Peter Kenez (2001) addresses this issue with respect to the cinefication movement in 1920s Russia.
32. GARP, f. 9576, op. 16, d. 270, l. 15.
33. RGALI, f. 2918, op. 1, d. 120, l. 23.
34. In a letter dated December 19, 1957, the central board of CSFS Beijing asked the Soviet-Chinese Friendship Society to continue the exchange of documentary, travelogue, and popular scientific films. The Main Film Distribution Board of China stated officially that it was not against the exchange and that four to six films could be sent to CSFS annually (GARP, f. 9576, op. 5, d. 13, l. 51).
35. GARP, f. 9576, op. 5, d. 95, l. 230.
36. *Dazhong dianying* was established in Shanghai in June 1950 with the explicit purpose of promoting “healthy” Soviet film as a replacement for “poisonous” American films. Articles with titles such as “Two Problems of American Imperialist Films” (Meiyi dianyingzhong de laingge wenti) regularly appeared in the journal, as did cartoons depicting the various vices associated with American film. See, for example, “Meiyi dianying” (American imperialist films), *Dazhong dianying* 13 (1950): 21.
37. Translation of an article in the Canton *Nanfang ribao*, June 2, 1952, in *Current Background* 213 (October 1, 1952), cited in Plunkett 1953.
38. One interviewee told me that he and his friends felt Pavel Korchagin was a better person than Lei Feng and more worthy of emulation.
39. My use of the everyday is also influenced by Lefebvre (1994) and Fitzpatrick (1999).

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