

Socialism, Aestheticized Bodies, and International Circuits of Gender: Soviet Female Film Stars in the People's Republic of China, 1949–1969

Tina Mai Chen

Volume 18, numéro 2, 2007

Global Histories
Histoires mondiales

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/018223ar>
DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/018223ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0847-4478 (imprimé)
1712-6274 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Chen, T. M. (2007). Socialism, Aestheticized Bodies, and International Circuits of Gender: Soviet Female Film Stars in the People's Republic of China, 1949–1969. *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada*, 18(2), 53–80. <https://doi.org/10.7202/018223ar>

Résumé de l'article

Cet article analyse l'importance des relations amoureuses et de la sexualité dans les films soviétiques dans le socialisme chinois des années 1950 et 1960. En examinant le mouvement des femmes soviétiques de part et d'autre de la frontière sino-soviétique – dans les films et comme membres des délégations de films — l'auteur fait ressortir les circuits internationaux des rapports hommes-femmes qui ont façonné l'image de la femme dans la Chine socialiste. Elle examine le point de vue des vedettes du cinéma soviétique comme Marina Ladygina, Vera Maretskaia et Marina Kovaleva par rapport à la Chine. Elle situe le mouvement loin de l'image de la femme « post-révolutionnaire qui aime s'amuser » associée à Marina Ladygina et plus près de l'image de la femme socialiste des conflits et de la partisanerie dans le plus vaste contexte de la théorie maoïste et des relations sino-soviétiques. Dans son examen des débats permettant d'établir les vedettes féminines du cinéma qui étaient appropriées pour la Chine, l'auteur retient les héroïnes des couples célèbres et approuvés des films chinois et soviétiques, comme celui de Zoya et Zhao Yiman. En examinant la façon dont les vedettes du cinéma soviétique ont fait partie de l'esthétique politique chinoise, l'auteur fait ressortir que la sexualité et l'amour sont plus importants dans sa perception de la femme dans la Chine maoïste qu'ils ne l'ont été pour la plupart des spécialistes des rapports hommes-femmes en Chine. En conséquence, cette approche offre une nouvelle perspective des idéologies maoïstes des rapports hommes-femmes grâce à l'intérêt particulier qu'elle accorde aux entités non-chinoises comme parties constituantes des subjectivités associées aux rapports hommes-femmes dans la Chine maoïste. L'auteur fait valoir que bien que les rapports hommes-femmes dans la Chine maoïste étaient surtout édictés au niveau national, l'internationalisme et les circuits internationaux des rapports hommes-femmes étaient au centre de leur articulation.

Socialism, Aestheticized Bodies, and International Circuits of Gender: Soviet Female Film Stars in the People's Republic of China, 1949–1969*

TINA MAI CHEN

Abstract

This paper analyses the importance of love relations and sexuality in Soviet film for Chinese socialism in the 1950s and 1960s. By looking at the movement of Soviet women across the Sino-Soviet border — in films and as part of film delegations — I highlight the international circuits of gender that shaped socialist womanhood in China. I examine Chinese discussion of Soviet film stars including Marina Ladygina, Vera Maretskaia, and Marina Kovaleva. I locate the movement away from 'fun-loving post-revolutionary' womanhood associated with Ladygina to socialist womanhood located in struggle and partisanship within the larger context of Maoist theory and Sino-Soviet relations. In my examination of debates over which female film stars were appropriate for China I draw out celebrated and sanctioned couplings of Chinese and Soviet film heroines, such as the links made between Zoya and Zhao Yiman. By looking at how Soviet film stars became part of Chinese political aesthetics, sexuality and love emerge as more important to our understanding of womanhood in Maoist China than has been recognized by most scholars of gender in China. This approach therefore offers a new perspective on Maoist ideologies of gender with its emphasis on non-Chinese bodies as constitutive of gender subjectivities in Maoist China. I argue that while gender in Maoist China was primarily enacted on a national level, internationalism and international circuits of gender were central to its articulation.

Résumé

Cet article analyse l'importance des relations amoureuses et de la sexualité dans les films soviétiques dans le socialisme chinois des années 1950 et 1960. En

* Research for this article was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. I would like to thank Sergei Kapterev for his excellent assistance in the Russian archives and Elena Baraban for her assistance with transliteration of titles. Thank you, also, to Joan Sangster and Steven Lee for inviting me to present an earlier version of this paper at the 2007 Canadian Historical Association annual meeting and to conference participants and the anonymous reviewers for their feedback and suggestions.

examinant le mouvement des femmes soviétiques de part et d'autre de la frontière sino-soviétique – dans les films et comme membres des délégations de films — l'auteur fait ressortir les circuits internationaux des rapports hommes-femmes qui ont façonné l'image de la femme dans la Chine socialiste. Elle examine le point de vue des vedettes du cinéma soviétique comme Marina Ladynina, Vera Maretskaïa et Marina Kovaleva par rapport à la Chine. Elle situe le mouvement loin de l'image de la femme « post-révolutionnaire qui aime s'amuser » associée à Marina Ladynina et plus près de l'image de la femme socialiste des conflits et de la partisanerie dans le plus vaste contexte de la théorie maoïste et des relations sino-soviétiques. Dans son examen des débats permettant d'établir les vedettes féminines du cinéma qui étaient appropriées pour la Chine, l'auteur retient les héroïnes des couples célèbres et approuvés des films chinois et soviétiques, comme celui de Zoya et Zhao Yiman. En examinant la façon dont les vedettes du cinéma soviétique ont fait partie de l'esthétique politique chinois, l'auteur fait ressortir que la sexualité et l'amour sont plus importants dans sa perception de la femme dans la Chine maoïste qu'ils ne l'ont été pour la plupart des spécialistes des rapports hommes-femmes en Chine. En conséquence, cette approche offre une nouvelle perspective des idéologies maoïstes des rapports hommes-femmes grâce à l'intérêt particulier qu'elle accorde aux entités non-chinoises comme parties constituantes des subjectivités associées aux rapports hommes-femmes dans la Chine maoïste. L'auteur fait valoir que bien que les rapports hommes-femmes dans la Chine maoïste étaient surtout édictés au niveau national, l'internationalisme et les circuits internationaux des rapports hommes-femmes étaient au centre de leur articulation.

In 1954 the Publication Department of the Central Government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) announced that publication of various Soviet masterpieces would no longer be permitted.¹ The reason given was that some of the adaptations introduced “bad elements” that twisted the true meaning of the masterpieces. In 1966 Zhong Yapeng, a Chinese student who had been studying in the Soviet Union but was sent back to China, reported that a love of “dirty” Western culture and jazz music now characterized Soviet culture.² In 1969 the Chinese press attacked an international film festival held in the Soviet Union and reported that the films promoted love of the class enemy under the guise of humanitarianism.³ These press reports and the ways in which they represent Soviet culture as susceptible to contamination reinforce the dete-

1 *Renmin ribao* (3 April 1954), 3.

2 *Renmin ribao* (15 November 1966), 5. On the history of jazz and “Yellow Music” in China, see Andrew Jones, *Yellow Music: Media Culture and Colonial Modernity in the Chinese Jazz Age* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).

3 *Renmin ribao* (13 September 1969).

riorating diplomatic relations between the Soviet Union and the PRC. Mao Zedong's concern with Soviet revisionism and its ascension in the USSR from the mid-1950s through the late 1960s provide the context for such formulations of Soviet literature, music, and film. Rather than simply contextualizing the comments, however, we need to analyse why the Chinese government and press reports utilized a language of desire and passed judgement on the appropriateness of certain love relations as indicators of Soviet betrayal of socialism. Further, we need to consider how desire and sexuality are related to geopolitics and contending understandings of socialism.

In this paper I analyse the importance of love relations to Sino–Soviet cultural politics and seek to demonstrate the centrality of a politics of love and sexuality to the global political framework of Maoism and of Sino–Soviet relations. The specific focus is Soviet female film stars in 1950s and 1960s China, and the ways in which they were received, discussed, and debated. I explore what we can learn about global circuits of gender and their constitutive role in defining socialist citizenship, as articulated at the intersection of internationalism and feminism. My approach to internationalism and feminism is not a matter of simply inserting women's bodies into studies of international diplomacy or of engaging in a comparative study of women in China and the Soviet Union.⁴ Rather, what I suggest is that a Maoist ideology of gender, even though primarily enacted on a national level, cannot be understood unless we interrogate the centrality of internationalism to its articulation.⁵ On one level, then, this paper works to gender the important insights offered by Julian Chang who, in his comparative study of the structures and channels of propaganda in the Soviet Union and PRC, highlights the interaction between international socialist alliances and national conditions.⁶ At another

4 For a discussion of the limits of nation-based comparative history, see Ann Laura Stoler, "Rethinking Colonial Categories: European Communities and the Boundaries of Rule," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 31, no. 1 (January 1989): 134-61; and Ann Laura Stoler, "Tense and Tender Ties: The Politics of Comparison in North American History and (Post)Colonial Studies," *The Journal of American History* 88, no. 3 (December 2001); also Deborah Cohen, "Comparative History: Buyer Beware," *GHI Bulletin* no. 29, 23-33. On the need for a more modest agenda and comparability as a temporal problem, see Harry Harootunian and Hyun Ok Park, eds., *Problems of Comparability/Possibilities for Comparative Studies*, special issue of *boundary 2: an international journal of literature and culture* 32, no. 2 (Summer 2005).

5 From a different perspective, but also calling for increased attention to the internationalist foundations of Maoism, see William C. Kirby, "China's Internationalization in the Early People's Republic: Dreams of a Socialist World Economy," *The China Quarterly* 188 (December 2006): 870-90; and Lei Guang, "Realpolitik Nationalism, International Sources of Chinese Nationalism," *Modern China* 31, no. 4 (2005): 487-514.

6 Chang primarily considers the institutional, functional, and theoretical linkages between propaganda work in the USSR and PRC. This approach leads him to conclude that one of the major differences between Soviet and Chinese propaganda work was the targeting by the former of mobilization of the general population and of education within the party by the latter.

level, the paper engages with scholarship on nationalism and gender. In terms of gender analysis I contend that we must recognize — and move beyond — the important yet limiting point that the discourse and practice of women's liberation in Maoist China conflated gender with class, on one hand, and mobilized women's body as metaphoric representation of nation, on the other hand.⁷

Because I am interested in how love and sexuality on film were related to international relations and global socialism, the movement between Chinese and Soviet space of female bodies associated with film proves fruitful. The movement, or lack thereof, of female film stars across the Sino–Soviet border — both on- and off-screen — allows us to think about what spaces existed for female agency and how a politics of sexuality inserted itself into the internationalist frameworks constitutive of Chinese socialism. In this movement, slippage exists between, 1. the representational bodies that moved across the Sino–Soviet border as films were bought and sold, and, 2. the physical bodies of female delegates who travelled to China. I approach this slippage as a productive tension and a site at which political aesthetics and aestheticized bodies met in the public culture of the PRC. As Wang Ban has argued, in the PRC aesthetic treatises, literary works, and political texts have combined to produce an identity between the individual and state, the corporeal existence of the subject and the symbolic system of the body politic.⁸ In this context, the state is invested, through the propaganda system, in producing and promoting particu-

While this is true as a general point, my focus on feature films as part of a multi-media system leads me to ask different questions about cultural politics and public culture by foregrounding those materials in China that were aimed at mobilizing the general public. See Julian Chang, "The Mechanics of State Propaganda: The People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union in the 1950s," in *New Perspectives on State Socialism in China*, eds., Timothy Cheek and Tony Saich (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1997), 76-124.

7 For an overview of the different approaches, see Gail Hershatter, *Women in China's Long Twentieth Century* (University of California International and Area Studies Project, in conjunction with the University of California Press and the California Digital Library, 2007). Also Rey Chow, *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995); Shuqin Cui, *Women Through the Lens: Gender and Nation in a Century of Chinese Cinema* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003); Tani Barlow, ed., *Gender Politics in Modern China: Writing and Feminism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993); Sally T. Lieberman, *The Mother and Narrative Politics in Modern China* Feminist Issues Series (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998). This work on gender in China is part of a larger body of scholarship on gender and nation, including works such as Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation* (London: Sage, 1997); Tamara Mayer, ed., *Gender Ironies of Nationalism: Sexing the Nation* (Taylor and Francis, 2007); Beth Baron, *Egypt as a Woman: Nationalism, Gender, and Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005). It also is part of efforts to bring together studies of sexuality and world history. See Merry Wiesner-Hanks, "World History and the History of Women, Gender, and Sexuality," *Journal of World History* 18, no. 1 (2007): 53-67.

8 Wang Ban, *The Sublime Figure of History: Aesthetics and Politics in Twentieth Century China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997).

lar aesthetics. At the same time, the ways in which bodies form identities with the state may involve transnational mediation, as is the case with Soviet film in China. It is not only the aesthetic framework that is important, but the ways in which aesthetics inform possibly subjectivities. For Chinese in the Maoist period, visual and textual representations generally preceded or stood in for physical contact with Soviet men and women. This created a situation where bodies acquired meaning through aesthetic signifiers in a manner weighted toward representational symbols (rather than a more active dialectic between physical body and aesthetic systems). I will return to the importance of the aestheticized body in the articulation of socialist internationalism and gendered identities linked to love and desire in section two.

I. Internationalism and Sino–Soviet Relations — Background

In 1949 Mao Zedong, leader of the Chinese Communist Party, published his article “On the People’s Democratic Dictatorship,” in which he laid out his policy of “leaning to one side.”⁹ After making clear that the Soviet Union would be an integral component of China’s socialist development, Mao proceeded to negotiate the 1950 Sino–Soviet Treaty of Friendship. While exchanges had occurred between Chinese Communists and their Russian counterparts since the October Revolution in 1917,¹⁰ the treaty formalized the relationship between the two nation-states. It set the stage for a concerted exchange of experts and students across the Sino–Soviet border throughout the 1950s, with the years 1953–1957 marking the largest numbers of Soviet specialists working in China.¹¹ Soviet experts had a strong presence in China until 1960, when Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev withdrew them and the Sino–Soviet split began in earnest. After this moment, the Soviet Union increasingly was identified as one of China’s enemies.

The political and diplomatic framework and breakdown of Sino–Soviet relations affected all aspects of life and politics in China, including the films

9 Mao Zedong, “On People’s Democratic Dictatorship,” Available at <<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1949mao.html>>, (viewed 25 January 2008).

10 For a cogent and provocative analysis of international solidarity among victims of imperialism forged through transnational cultural movement, see Tang Xiaobing, “Echoes of *Roar China!* On Vision and Voice in Modern Chinese Art,” *positions: east asia cultures critique* 14, no. 2 (2006): 467–94.

11 Shen Zhihua, *Sulian zhuanjia zai Zhongguo, 1948–1960* (Beijing: Zhongguo guoji guangbao chubanshe, 2003); Deborah A. Kaple, “Soviet Advisers in China in the 1950s,” in *Brothers in Arms: The Rise and Fall of the Sino–Soviet Alliance, 1945–1963*, ed., Odd Arne Westad (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Press and Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998). On Sino–Soviet student exchanges, see Douglas Stiffler, “Establishing a ‘New-Style, Regular’ University in the People’s Republic of China,” in *Dilemmas of Victory: The Early 1950s in the PRC* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); Alexander Pantsov, *The Bolsheviks and the Chinese Revolution 1919–1927* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2000).

available to Chinese citizens. Contrary to received wisdom, however, there was not a complete cessation of Soviet cultural imports to China. Rather, film exchange was truncated and Soviet film imports dropped to one to three films per year after 1964, a stark contrast to imports as high as 30 or more per year in the early 1950s.¹² Even with these extremely reduced numbers Soviet films previously imported, especially those purchased in the first half of the 1950s, continued to circulate in China — albeit in different contexts with altered meanings. Bearing this in mind, we can examine Soviet film in Maoist China to shed light on changing socialist geographies and their gendered politics. As Shen Zhihua remarks, the masses learned about the Soviet Union through Soviet films and Soviet specialists who were sent to China. To this, I add, the masses learned about love and sexuality in part through the cultural products on display.¹³

Most scholars of gender in Maoist China tend to emphasize the lack of desire, love, and sexuality in the political culture of the period. For example, Dai Jinhua asserts that in the new classical revolutionary genre of film:

Women were narrated in the gaze of the authorities (this gaze is of course male, though it is not the gaze of male desire) and emptied of their own narrativizing subjectivity. Also, because the image of Woman no longer served as an object of the gaze of male desire, women also ceased to exist as a gender group distinct from men And just as the social organization of contemporary Chinese society failed to produce a female cultural revolution, so the elimination of cinematic narratives' language of desire and the character's gaze of desire meant that characters on screen lost their gender identity. As the gender difference between men and women weakened, political and class difference replaced it.¹⁴

Dai's emphasis on the erasure of Woman as historical subject has been taken up by many scholars, particularly as they engage with the social meaning and politics of militarized female bodies in the PRC. But, as Rosemary Roberts reminds us, the assignment of masculine identities to revolutionaries did not

12 *Zhongguo dianying faxing fangying tongji ziliao jiangbian (1949-1957)* (Beijing: Zhongguo dianying faxing fangying gongxi, 1958).

13 The ways in which film and literature shaped popular understandings of love and sexuality in Maoist China have been the subject of much scholarship, such as Harriet Evans, *Women and Sexuality in China: 1949 to the Present* (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1996); Xueping Zhong, *Masculinity Besieged? Issues of Modernity and Male Subjectivity in Chinese Literature of Late Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); Neil Jeffrey Diamant, *Revolutionizing the Family: Politics, Love and Divorce in Urban and Rural China, 1949-1968* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000). These studies, however, do not foreground international aspects of sexuality or love.

14 Jing Wang and Tani E. Barlow, eds., *Cinema and Desire: Feminist Marxism and Cultural Politics in the Work of Dai Jinhua* (London: New York: Verso), 102.

necessarily mean an erasure of gender and sexuality from the public. In many cases, sexuality was reassigned to the politically incorrect, the counter-revolutionary, and therefore was still very much part of the aesthetic signifiers of the period.¹⁵ Moreover, as I argue, the internationalist framework of Maoism, and Sino–Soviet cultural exchange in particular, provided another set of bodies whose sexuality was both promise and threat for Chinese socialism in the 1950s and 1960s.

II. Bodies on the Move/Bodies on Display

Soviet women who came to the People's Republic of China in official capacities tended not to be the Soviet experts responsible for training Chinese in different aspects of technical production and industrial development. Rather, the women were Soviet film stars who appeared as part of delegations to promote Sino–Soviet friendship, or they were women who came on short-term exchanges generally related to health care or education.¹⁶ Clearly, there was a gendered politics of expertise at work that privileged the male body as the international conduit of knowledge.¹⁷ With respect to Soviet women in China, it was largely through propaganda materials that Chinese citizens became familiar with a broad range of Soviet women and their accomplishments in various fields, including national defense, agriculture, education, science, health care, and so on.¹⁸ Despite the regular appearance of photographs accompanying newspaper reports on the activities of women in the Soviet Union, few Chinese women had opportunities for direct contact with these women. Chinese students studying in the Soviet Union, and the relatively small number of Chinese national female model workers who travelled to Moscow as part of official

15 Rosemary Roberts, "Feminising the Counter-Revolution: An Analysis of Negative Characters in the Revolutionary Model Works of the Chinese Cultural Revolution," in *Asia Examined: Proceedings of the 15th Biennial Conference of the ASAA 2004*, ed., Robert Cribb (Canberra, Australia: Asian Studies Association of Australia (ASAA) & Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, 2004). Also, Rosemary Roberts, "Positive Women Characters in the Revolutionary Model Works of the Chinese Cultural Revolution: An Argument Against the Theory of Erasure of Gender and Sexuality," *Asian Studies Review* 28, no. 4 (December 2004): 407–22.

16 This point is based on anecdotal evidence. Many female students did travel to the Soviet Union for schooling, but the number of Soviet women who came to China is much smaller than the number of male experts. However, I have not been able to find detailed data breaking these numbers down by gender.

17 For an analysis of gender and expertise as related to the training of women in occupations such as tractor driving, train conductors, etc, by male Soviet experts, see Tina Mai Chen, "Female Icons, Feminist Iconography? Socialist Rhetoric and Women's Agency in 1950s China," *Gender & History* 15, no. 2 (August, 2003): 268–95.

18 For example, Zhongsu youhao xiehui zonghui, "Sulian funü shenghuo yu gongzuo tupian zhanlie shuoming (Explanatory notes on the Photographic Exhibit of Soviet Women's Lives and Work)," *Renmin ribao* (3 January 1950), 3.

Chinese delegations, were the exception. These Chinese women, however, also participated in the aestheticized politicization of Soviet women and their relationship to China and Chinese women. Various articles published in the state-sponsored mass media reported on the experiences of Chinese women with specific Soviet women.

Given the ways in which Soviet and Chinese women moved — or did not move — across the Sino–Soviet border in official capacities, it is important to focus on the displayed or aestheticized bodies that were constantly on the move in the form of propaganda and cultural exchanges (including dance and theatre troupes).¹⁹ The embodiment of internationalist rhetoric and policies associated with Sino–Soviet friendship more often than not came in the form of filmic and visual materials, giving these materials a heightened place in the lived experience of internationalism. The close interactions between Soviet visual materials and the lives of Chinese women was further reinforced, as I alluded to above, by Chinese national models such as Liang Jun (officially recognized as China’s First Female Tractor Driver). Not only did Liang Jun travel to Moscow but she incorporated into her well-rehearsed and officially sanctioned life narrative the early inspiration she received from watching Soviet films. These references included the film *Tractor Drivers* and Soviet characters such as Pasha, who drove a tank against the German invaders after her family was killed in the film *She Protects the Motherland*.²⁰

Liang Jun’s life story reinforced a central tenet of early 1950s propaganda campaigns to “Learn from the Soviet Union,” and that proclaimed “The Soviet Union is China’s Tomorrow.” These campaigns and their Chinese counterparts held up Soviet women as progressive examples for Chinese women and men. Their lifestyles and struggles were seen as prefiguring the struggles that Chinese were undertaking and identification with these women as part of an international socialist struggle was encouraged. But what were the specific forms of identification that were encouraged between Soviet and Chinese women in the Maoist period? What were the narrative and aesthetic conventions through which internationalist community was imagined? What spaces

19 On the role of gendered and racialized bodies in international politics and diplomatic relations of the Cold War period more generally, see Naima Prevots, *Dance for Export: Cultural Diplomacy and the Cold War* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1998); Uta G. Poiger, “Rock ‘n’ Roll, Female Sexuality, and the Cold War Battle over German Identities,” *The Journal of Modern History* 68, no. 3 (1996): 577-616.

20 This appeared in accounts authored by Liang Jun and others in the 1950s. She told me a similar story in an interview conducted in 1996, and as recently as 2003 in a Taiwanese newspaper story on Liang Jun, she made the same comments about Soviet films and her career choice to become a tractor driver. “Nu toulajishou Liang Jun,” *Funu Nongye Laodong Mofan* (Beijing: Quanguo Gongnongbing Laodong Mofan Daibiaohui, 1950); “Nu Tuolajishou,” *Mofan Nugong* (Wuhan: Wuhan gongren chubanshe, 1950); Xie Zhongde, “Nongmin kan Tuolajishou (The Peasants watched Tractor Driver),” *Dazhong Dianying* (1953).

existed for female agency in these internationalist social imaginaries?²¹ And how did the aestheticized filmic body play into a politics of sexuality that was perhaps an unintended component of the conjoining of internationalism, feminism, and the realization of socialism in China?

In the PRC visual culture mediated between individual Chinese and those Soviet female bodies who built socialism through their labour. Contact with model Soviet women came in the form of print and visual media, as well as Soviet experts and delegates visiting China. However, Soviet delegates — male and female — tended to visit urban areas only, whereas photographs of Soviet men and women regularly appeared in the 1950s on the pages of national and provincial newspapers and magazines. As a result, for the large majority of Chinese who had any exposure to Soviet women, these women appeared as photographs and filmed bodies. A culturally mediated framework was produced that simultaneously rendered socialist internationalism intimate and embodied and effected a distance from the flesh of the bodies who enacted socialism. Moreover, even when Soviet women came to China as part of official delegations they did so as over-determined representational bodies. The Chinese who had direct contact with Soviet women in China, or read of their visits in the press, made sense of these women through prior exposure to visual materials, including film, that the propaganda department skillfully used to explain the relevance of Soviet women (and the Soviet Union more generally) to Maoist China.²² For Soviet actresses, their bodies emerged as aestheticized representational bodies through the films and promotional materials distributed by Sovexportfilm and the Chinese media. These included film posters with Chinese text, translations of the songs (which proved very popular), and in some cases glossy photographs of the film stars.²³

21 The concept of social imaginaries understands the social to be composed of social entities that include the symbolic conception of the political. The concept encourages us to interpret imagination as collective social fact that is a critical part of everyday life. See Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar and Benjamin Lee, eds., *New Imaginaries*, special issue of *Public Culture* 14 no. 1 (Winter 2002).

22 On the ways in which print propaganda functioned to give meaning to film and guide the language and emotions for understanding Soviet and Chinese films, see Tina Mai Chen, "Propagating the Propaganda Film: the meaning of film in CCP writings, 1949-1965," *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 15, no. 2 (Fall 2003): 154-93.

23 Russian State Archives for Literature and Arts (hereafter RGALI), f 2918, op. 4, 589, l. 15-23, "Nekotorye voprosy razvitiia kino v KNR (informatsiia). Posol'stvo SSSR v KNR, Pekin (Information on the development of cinema in the PRC)," Embassy of the USSR in PRC, Beijing. 20 May 1959. On complaints about the shortage of Soviet poster sets (as opposed to the availability of these materials for American films) in the late 1940s, see RGALI f 2918, op. 2, d. 123, l. 196, "Zakliuchenie N. Latykina (N. Latykin's Report)," 1947.

The visual material that gave meaning to Soviet film focused on the main characters and the actors and actresses who played these parts. In so doing the materials also contributed to an international star culture for Chinese national audiences that worked to reinforce the politicization of particular bodies and their over-determination within the context of Sino–Soviet relations. Within the Soviet Union the most prominent directors used the same actors repeatedly for certain roles and, in the case of female leads, the relationship between director and actress was often a relevant factor.²⁴ This reliance upon a small group of actors and actresses for lead roles also reflected the typecasting of actors and actresses. Chinese viewers thus became familiar with specific faces and the types of characters they played. For example, Vera Maretskaia played Alexandra in *Member of the Government*, and Comrade P in *She Defends Her Country* (a.k.a. *No Greater Love*). Both these films featured women who were loyal to revolution over family; but in the case of *She Defends Her Country* loyalty to revolution and the party was in part inspired by the literal crushing of maternal love.²⁵ The Chinese public then brought to their understanding of the actress off the screen the culmination of the values and struggles she depicted on the screen. This simplistic reduction of characters to types was further reinforced by the way films were written and produced, as well as the way they were circulated throughout China.²⁶ Specifically, film projection units in the PRC used the technique of pre-screening discussions that introduced audiences to the characters and then explained the class category of each character. The purpose was to avoid incorrect readings of the films and any ambiguity about where in the social structure heroes were found.

The Communist Parties in the Soviet Union and China also expected publicly recognized individuals to embody the positive characteristics enacted on screen in their everyday lives. For this reason, actors and actresses were often selected from appropriate class backgrounds. In the case of the Soviet actor Boris Chirkov, anecdotal evidence abounds about his continued affinity with peasants and his refusal of a state pension because others needed the money more than he. It is not surprising that when Soviet films stars arrived in China as part of delegations, the Chinese greeted them by calling out the names of

24 For example consider Marina Ladygina who was married to director Ivan Pyriev and who frequently starred in the films he directed.

25 ‘Comrade P’ watches her son be run over by a tank driven by a German soldier. *Member of the Government* is the story of a young woman who, during rural collectivization, rises to a government position despite the opposition of her husband.

26 For instructions provided to the Film Organizer and Film Projection personnel concerning propaganda materials and how best to make film understandable to rural and urban audiences, see Dianying faxing tongxun (passim); for a specific example see Zhongyang wenhuabu dianyingju, “Guanyu xiang nongmin xuanchuan zongluxian de dianying fangying gongzuo de tongzhi (Notification of the Central Line for Propaganda Work for the Peasants by Film Projection)” in *Dianying faxing tongxun* No. 2, 1 January 1954.

their film characters; during the visit of Chirkov in 1952, it entailed the crowd calling out of “Maxim,” in recognition of his role as Maxim Gorky in the very popular trilogy.²⁷ Or, in another instance, the Chinese child and Young Pioneer member Van Ti wrote a letter in 1951 to a Soviet child actress Natasha Zashchipina — *Once There was a Girl* (1944), *First-Year Student* (1948), *On the Steppe* (1951) — with whom she identified.²⁸ Not surprisingly — as far as my evidence suggests — only actors who played the heroes in these films were sent abroad as part of film delegations; actors in villain roles were not appropriate for building ties of identification across socialist nations.

III. Soviet Film Stars and Internationalist Identifications in Local Spaces

When we consider how these aestheticized and over-determined female bodies helped articulate an internationalism as part of the project of women’s liberation in socialist China, there are certain Soviet female film stars we need to consider, including Marina Ladygina, Vera Maretskaia, and Marina Kovaleva. Each of these actresses starred in numerous Soviet-era films that circulated in the urban and rural areas of the PRC. I have singled them out because both Ladygina and Maretskaia visited China as part of the delegations in 1952 and 1956 respectively. Moreover, the films that Ladygina and Maretskaia starred in were extremely popular in China upon their initial release in the 1950s but had different fates after the Sino–Soviet split in the 1960s.



Marina Ladygina

Let me begin by considering Marina Ladygina and her role in the making of Chinese socialism. Marina Ladygina starred in a number of Soviet films that were immensely popular in China, including *Tractor Drivers* (1939; PRC 1951), *Kuban Cossacks* (1949; PRC 1950), and *Tales of the Siberian Land* (1947; PRC 1951). Two of these films in particular — *Tractor Drivers* and *Kuban Cossacks* — were staples of rural film projection units, thereby ensuring that those in China who had access to mobile or permanent film exhibition likely saw these films. Notably, audience numbers for *Tractor Drivers* and *Kuban Cossacks* exceeded 17 million each in their first two years of circulation, a time when the number of rural film projection units was still relatively small.²⁹ Moreover, Ladygina travelled to China as part of a Soviet

27 RGALI f. 2918, op. 1, d. 119, l. 56, “Pis’mo o mesiachnike kitaisko-sovetskoi družby Ivanu Grigorievichu Bolshakovu ot A. Fedorova (A. Fedorov’s Letter to Ivan Grigorievich Bolshakov Regarding the Sino–Soviet Friendship Month Film Festival),” 21 November 1952.

28 RGALI, f. 2918, op. 2, d. 131, l. 18–20, “Pis’mo Natashe Zashchipinoini ot pionerki Van Ti (Letter from Young Pioneer Van Ti to Natasha Zashchipina),” 24 June 1951.

29 “Yijiusijiu nian yilai guanzhong zuiduo zhi yingpian jiqiyang chu chengji,” *Dianying faxing tongxun* 2 (15 April 1954), 64.

delegation for the 1952 November Film Festival that included actors Boris Chirkov and Nikolai Cherkasov (Professor Polezhaev in *The Baltic Deputy*).³⁰ As part of the delegation Ladygina met with Mao Zedong as well as workers, peasants, and youth. She also spoke to audiences before screenings of films. For this 1952 Soviet delegation, the actors were particularly sought after, and the crowds called out to the actors by the names of the characters they played on screen.³¹ Sources also noted that Chinese audiences, which had contact with the delegation, sang the songs from the Soviet films — the songs from *Kuban Cossacks* and *Tractor Driver* were among the most popular — further reinforcing identification of Ladygina with the characters she played on screen.³²

Tractor Driver and *Kuban Cossacks* are both light-hearted musicals directed by Ivan Pyriev in which Ladygina plays characters who are cheerfully successful within the socialist agriculture collective. These films celebrate prosperity and happiness on the collective farm and hyperbolize the success. Film historians have noted that these films were produced in the Soviet Union precisely when agriculture was undergoing a severe crisis in the late 1930s;³³ however, in the Chinese context their initial circulation in 1950 and 1951 corresponded with the period of economic restructuring after eight years of war against the Japanese, four years of civil war, and the First Five Year Plan. Moreover, because the films were always located in the Chinese future — as a promise of what was to come — characters such as Dasha (played by Klara Luchko) and Galina (played by Ladygina) embodied a specific aspect of socialist liberation: a fun-loving post-revolutionary female agency. This fun-loving post-revolutionary womanhood was premised upon an agency that was clearly located in the agricultural cooperative but that allowed for carefree expressions (and fulfillment of) consumer desires and flirtatious sexuality.³⁴ The dance

30 RGALI, f. 2918, op. 1, d. 119, l. 56, “Pis'mo o mesiachnike kitaisko-sovetskoi druzhby Ivanu Grigorievichu Bolshakovu ot A.Fedorova (A.Fedorov's Letter to Ivan Grigorievich Bolshakov Regarding Sino-Soviet Friendship Month Film Festival),” 21 November 1952.

31 Ibid.

32 The power of the songs as a source of cultural identification was reinforced for me when one interviewee in 2002 joyfully sang one of the main songs from *Kuban Cossacks* in response to my questions about what she remembered of Soviet films in the 1950s. Chengdu, interview by author, 2002.

33 Richard Taylor makes this point and also analyses how the kolkhoz musical was an act of faith in which audiences were willing to collaborate despite — or because of — its futuristic promises divorced from daily realities. Richard Taylor, “Singing on the Steppes for Stalin: Ivan Pyr'ev and the Kolkhoz Musical in Soviet Cinema,” *Slavic Review* 58, no.1 (spring 1999): 143-159.

34 Importantly, the female characters in *Kuban Cossacks* are not beset with the class ambiguities of the male protagonist. Ex-Cossack Gordei (played by Sergej Luklanov) was critiqued in the Chinese press because of his proclivities for bourgeois life and for moments of weakness when he focuses on himself as individual rather than the collective. Galina has none of these ambiguous characteristics and her strength of character is what enables Gordei and others to embrace a proper socialist identity.

scenes and songs in *Tractor Driver*, and the scenes at the fair in *Kuban Cossacks*, are about the good life.

Elsewhere, I have analysed the power of the “good life” imagery in China and its association with the Soviet Union as China’s future.³⁵ I have argued that from its inception the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) viewed love and sexuality as important aspects of society that needed to be redefined within a socialist framework. In this paper it is the temporal frameworks of internationalism and women’s liberation that interest me because they shed light on how particular embodiments of female agency can simultaneously be part of — and displaced from — a Maoist ideology of gender. In the case of Marina Ladygina and the roles she played for 1950s Chinese audiences, the CCP chose to provide guidelines for interpretation. The editor of *Dazhong Dianying* responded to a query regarding the portrayal of Soviet citizens as fun-loving by stating “Soviet people are determined but this does not mean that they don’t have feelings.”³⁶ She clarified by stating that once the Soviet Union evolved into a happy and prosperous society the people could express their love at various levels — for each other, for their culture, and for the collective farm — *because* of the new society. In other responses to reader queries in the film, the editor made clear that love as shown on screen in these films was part of China’s future, not the Chinese present. For women working in newly formed Chinese cooperatives, therefore, they were called upon to identify with Marina Ladygina and to see her characters’ lives as just beyond the horizon. Thus, positive desire and sexuality, as embodied by Ladygina, was a component of the political culture of the 1950s, even if its realization was projected into the Chinese future. Negative depictions of overt expression of desire and sexuality also frequently appeared with respect to class enemies, such as the Americans, Guomindang supporters, or other counter-revolutionaries.

Another point to remember is that in the context of the initial circulation of these films — and the rapid and promising development of socialism in China — identification by urban (as opposed to rural) women with Ladygina would be marked by campaigns such as the 1956 “Dress Reform Campaign.”³⁷ This campaign came out of an early assessment by Mao Zedong and the CCP that confident and mature socialist societies would have socialist women who dressed nicely. That is, post-revolutionary women could develop practices of

35 See chapter four in my manuscript in progress, Tina Mai Chen, *Electric Shadows and Everyday Internationalism: Soviet Film and the Making of Maoist China*.

36 Mei Liang, “Rang women jinyibu de liaojie Sulian renmin de shenghuo (Explaining Soviet lifestyle to allow us to progress),” *Dazhong Dianying* (1951), 14-16. “

37 The “Dress Reform Campaign” was promoted in newspapers such as *Zhongguo qingnianbao* and others, that targeted youth and promoted urban leisure, in sections such as “Zhoumo (weekend).” While these papers were technically national papers certain sections took urban youth to be their primary readers.

beauty and fashion that were socialist rather than capitalist or feudal — and might even wear pretty clothes *for* the socialist nation.³⁸ When coupled with Soviet women as objects of Chinese desire, post-revolutionary woman thus were located not only in the Chinese socialist nation but in the global socialist future. This type of international identification, that allowed for the possibility of a female socialist subjectivity based in a post-revolutionary moment, was short-lived, however. It could not survive the change in Sino–Soviet relations that came with Khrushchev’s de-Stalinization, Mao’s critique of Soviet revisionism, and the renewed focus within China on class struggle that began with the Great Leap Forward and became more pronounced in the 1960s and with the Cultural Revolution. As a result, the films featuring Marina Ladygina showed less often. Other Soviet films, also released in China in the early 1950s, became staples of film projection units through the 1960s. These films included *The Fall of Berlin* (1949; PRC 1950), with female lead played by Marina Kovaleva, as well as *Village Schoolteacher* (1947; PRC 1950), *She Defends the Motherland* (1943; PRC 1951), and *Mother* (1955; PRC 1955) — all of which had Vera Maretskaia as the female lead.

Village Schoolteacher and *She Defends the Motherland* were among the first films to be imported into the PRC and dubbed in Chinese in 1950, but Vera Maretskaia did not travel to the PRC until 1956. At this time she was part of a delegation sent to celebrate the November Soviet Film Festival, which featured the films *Mother*, *Unfinished Tale*, *Alien Kin*, and *Soldier Ivan Brovkin*.³⁹ The 1956 delegation was made up of six members in addition to Maretskaia, including director Leonid Lukov (*Different Destinies* [1956], *Private Alexander Matrosov* [1947], *Mother* [1941]), and actor Sergei Bondarchuk (*Young Guard* [1948] and *Unfinished Tale* [1955]). Over the course of their stay they visited Beijing, Nanjing, Shanghai, Hangzhou, and Canton for a total of 18 meetings with 25,000 audience members.

In contrast to Marina Ladygina, whose sometimes comic and always fun-loving characters seemed best suited to a post-revolutionary future, Vera Maretskaia embodied a female subjectivity rooted in struggle and resistance rather than fulfillment. In this role she was deemed relevant to China both before and after the Sino–Soviet split. The films with her as the female lead

38 See Antonia Finnane, *Changing Clothes in China: Fashion, Nation, History*, (London: Hurst, forthcoming 2007); Antonia Finnane, “Yu Feng and the 1950s Dress Reform Campaign: Global Hegemony and Local Agency In the Art of Fashion,” in *Wu sheng zhi sheng: jindai Zhongguo funü yu wenhua, 1650 – 1950 (Silent Voices: Women and Modern Chinese Culture, 1650 – 1950)*, ed., Yu Chien Ming (Taipei: Academia Sinica, 2003), II: 235-68

39 RGALI, f. 2918, op. 3, d. 150, l. 77, “Otchet o provedenii festivalia sovfilmov v KNR, posviashchennogo 39-i godovshchine VOS revoliutsii. Za podpisu upolnomochennogo SEF v KNR A.P. Zakharevicha (Report on the Soviet Film Festival in PRC dedicated to the 39th anniversary of the Great October Socialist Revolution).” Signed by A.P. Zakharevich, the representative of Soviet Export Film in PRC, 12 December 1956.

continued to be shown throughout the Cultural Revolution period and to receive official sanction as appropriate representations of socialist womanhood across the various political campaigns of the 1950s and 1960s. The continued relevance across the Sino-Soviet split of Maretskaia's characters was because when political campaigns narrowed the possibilities for socialist womanhood it was the figure of the woman coming to consciousness via class struggle who remained, not the fun-loving woman. The form of socialist womanhood represented by Maretskaia was summed up in a 1952 article that extolled the Chinese to learn from Maretskaia and her character in *Member of the Government*. The article emphasized her commitment to the Communist Party and her embodiment of great strength.⁴⁰ This characterization of Maretskaia's characters was reinforced in another article published not long after this article that discussed the unforgettable female characters of Soviet films. Notably, this article praised the characters played by both Maretskaia and Ladygina; the former for her patriotism and commitment to the party and the latter for her proximity to rural life and her leadership role in this capacity as seen in *Kuban Cossacks*.⁴¹ However, the references to Ladygina were sandwiched between much more substantial paragraphs discussing Maretskaia in *Government Member*, *She Protects the Motherland*, and *Village Schoolteacher* (despite a prominent still photograph from the film of Ladygina smiling at the camera in *Kuban Cossacks*, among other photos on the page). The effect was a privileging of a female socialist subjectivity rooted in struggle, but haunted by the promise of a more glamorous post-revolutionary womanhood.



Vera Maretskaia as Varenka in *The Village Schoolteacher* (1947).



Vera Maretskaia as Pasha (a.k.a. Comrade P) in *She Defends the Motherland* (1943). The placard reads: "Я партизанка я убивала немецких солдат." (I am a partisan. I killed German soldiers.)

40 Chuang Yuan, "Bixu lianyong Funü de Chenda Liliang, 'Wo kan Zhengfu yuan' (We must connect with the great strength of women, I saw 'Member of Government')," *Dazhong dianying*, no. 3 (1953): 18.

41 No title, *Dazhong dianying*, no. 4 (1953): 8-9.

When we consider the characters Maretskaia played on screen, several common themes emerge that are relevant to a discussion of the shifting constellations of internationalism, female agency, and socialism in China: 1. the women are left alone either by the death or political arrest of their husbands/lovers and then take up a militant defence of nation or promotion of socialism; 2. the characters find fulfillment in the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) and socialism rather than personal love relations; 3. the characters are not always young and attractive — but showcase strength and determination as they undergo a desexualization over the course of the film; 4. the characters themselves always occupy and defend domestic/national space, whereas the male characters in the film often take up duties in international space.

The message of life-long patriotism — and martyrdom — associated with the body of Vera Maretskaia broadly subjects a liberated female agency to erasure in favour of militarized struggle and sacrifice. The rather heavy-handed slippage from Mother of family to Mother of nation, played by Maretskaia in all three films (in *Village Schoolteacher* her students function as her children), points to the oft-noted metaphoric deployment of woman = nation that renders problematic the mobilization of female bodies for nationalist and socialist projects. But what we also see in Maretskaia's embodiment of struggle is that, because of the ways in which historical struggles in the Soviet Union and China were linked together in the broader Maoist revolutionary discourse, she became a means to imagine and bring to fruition internationalist identities. What I am suggesting here is that nationalist struggles become intimately tied to socialist histories; and because Soviet films echoed similar stories and representations in the Chinese context, they established internationalist connections between certain types of women.

In 1950s China, Maoist discourse located China within a history of socialism that began with the October Revolution and then followed the course of history laid out by the Soviet Union.⁴² In the 1960s, with the Sino-Soviet split and contesting interpretations of socialism, Maoist revolutionary discourse identified China as the only nation upholding the legacy of the October Revolution and proclaimed China the centre of a Third World-focused global struggle.⁴³ Maretskaia's female roles found a place in both moments of the

42 Tina Mai Chen, "Socialist Geographies, Internationalist Temporalities, and Traveling Film Technologies: Sino-Soviet Film Exchange in the 1950s and 1960s" in *Time Signatures: Technologies and Temporalities in Chinese Screen Cultures* (in progress), eds. Olivia Khoo and Sean Metzger.

43 On Mao's Three World Theory (*sange shijie lilun*), see Tang Tsou and Morton Halperin, "Mao Tse-tung's Revolutionary Strategy and Peking's International Behavior," *American Political Science Review* 59 (1965): 80-99; also William E. Ratliff, "Chinese Communist Cultural Diplomacy toward Latin America, 1949-1960," *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 49, no. 1 (February 1969): 53-79.

Chinese revolutionary struggle because of the focus on determined, principled, and unwavering support for the Communist Party and socialism. The Maoist focus on continuous revolution and class struggle meant that in the 1960s the female roles of Maretskaia could be loosed from Soviet history and co-opted for a socialist history where the enemy was ever-present. That is, these films and their focus on the people's struggle against fascism and capitalism remained relevant to 1960s China and its understanding of the internationalist elements of socialism.

This relevance was first consolidated in the early 1950s with the linking of Soviet films — and their film stars — to specific Chinese films and film stars. Materials related to Chinese and Soviet films frequently reminded readers and film viewers that the Soviet defeat of Nazi Germany and CCP defeat of the Japanese, the Guomindang, and the United States (in the Korean War) were locally specific struggles in one historical process. The interlocked national histories were made clear when the Chinese actress Tian Hua — who played the heroine Xi'er in one of the best-known films of the Maoist period *White-Haired Girl* — wrote an article published in *People's Daily* in 1952 welcoming the Soviet Cultural Delegation to China. She began by saying that she, along with the 450 million Chinese, was happy to welcome the delegation on the occasion of the 35th anniversary of the Great October Socialist Revolution. As she spoke on behalf of the Chinese nation, she stated that even though this was the first time that these Soviet men and women had come to China, through their films they had already been taken into the hearts of millions of Chinese. She singled out certain films, including *Kuban Cossacks* and the characters played by Marina Ladygina (who was a member of the Soviet delegation) for showing China about the special characteristics of Soviet socialist women. She also mentioned *The Fall of Berlin*, *Chapaev*, *Alexander Matrosov*, and other films that brought together the narratives of war and struggle. She concluded by saying that she didn't know how to thank the members of the Soviet delegation except to say that they had inspired her to work even harder for world peace, a higher level of (political) thinking, and greater service to the people. Notably, while her comments began with specific references to the Chinese revolution, her speech ended on a worldwide and universalist note. The rhetorical strategy is one that in the 1950s worked to place China alongside the Soviet Union. This same strategy in the 1960s would function to remove the Soviet Union as party to a global socialist movement.

In the shifting contexts of reception, we also need to remember that Tian Hua's comments, like the bodies of Soviet actresses, would have been mediated through her screen persona. As Xi'er in *White-Haired Girl*, Tian Hua was recognized through her portrayal of a young woman who flees from a rapacious landlord after her father is forced to give her to the landlord to repay a debt. After her escape, Xi'er lives alone in the woods and because of lack of nutri-

tion her hair turns white. In the end she is found and liberated by her lover Dachun — whom she had planned to marry before the deal with the landlord took place. While Xi'er lived off temple offerings, Dachun had joined the CCP so his role in the film is as embodiment of the CCP. This film underwent various revisions from the 1950s through the Cultural Revolution to keep it in line with the dominant political climate of the Maoist period. In all its versions scholars have noted that, 1. it conflates gender with class; 2. women's liberation rests upon a masculinized saviour; and, 3. Xi'er is increasingly de-sexualized as scenes, involving pregnancy and childbirth resulting from her rape, were removed from official versions in the 1960s.⁴⁴ In many ways, these aspects of Xi'er's character echo those of the characters played by Maretskaia.

The similarities between the female characters in these Chinese and Soviet films are important not only because of their contemporaneous circulation and the ways in which they reinforced the gendered identities enacted in each film. Equally important is the international circuit of female heroines participating in (global) socialist revolution that was produced when Tian Hua was placed alongside Soviet film stars. This pairing frequently happened within and outside China because *White-Haired Girl* was one of the films that China exported internationally and that won global acclaim at various film festivals — a fact reported back to the Chinese people.⁴⁵ Recognizing the international circuit of bodies adds an often overlooked dimension to our understanding of gender in socialist film. In the individual films the women remained in national/domestic space and the female agency displayed was heavily constrained by a masculinized party and narrative of salvation. But when the films were placed alongside each other, the combined effect was an internationalist connection that was easily translated to Chinese viewers through reportage, as well as the double-billing and side-by-side advertising of Chinese films and Soviet films. As a result, internationalism as linked to specific aestheticized female bodies was part of the lived experience of Maoism, and its attendant ideology of gender. Chinese, Soviet (and later Korean, Vietnamese, Latin American, and African) women appeared in battle; and the battle was against fascism, capitalism, and imperialism wherever it may appear — inside or outside the country. As such, through these films women in China were expected to model their behaviour

44 On changes to *White-Haired Girl*, see Chen Xiaomei, *Acting the Right Part: Political Theater and Popular Drama in Contemporary China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002). For women and sexuality in the model films more generally, also see Robert Chi "The Red Detachment of Women: Resenting, Regendering, Remembering," *Chinese Films in Focus: 25 New Takes*, ed. Chris Berry (London: BFI, 2003).

45 From 1949–1957 audience figures for *White-Haired Girl* outside China (as recorded by the PRC) were over 22 million, of which 14,337,500 were Soviet viewers. *Zhongguo dianying faxing fangying tongji ziliao jiangbian (1949-1957)* (Beijing: Zhongguo dianying faxing fangying gongxi, 1958): 22.

and to understand it in relation to internationalist social imaginaries. However, while life histories reveal that this inspired some women to participate in socialist struggles and opened up local spaces for global action by women, there was little space within this framework for female agency as a goal; women's participation in active and militaristic capacities pushed aside more diverse considerations of what a feminist socialist ideology of gender might look like.⁴⁶

IV. Reaching for the Stars while Holding up the Sky

When we think about what a socialist ideology of gender with an internationalist framework might look like, we must also consider what Mao and the CCP thought it should not look like. For this we need to turn to debates about certain films that were deemed unacceptable at specific moments because of potential negative points of connection between Soviet and Chinese women. In these cases the politics of sexuality comes to the forefront of the analysis. While earlier sections of this paper focused on those films that had mass circulation and thereby informed lived experiences of the combined projects of internationalism, feminism, and socialism, in this final section I focus on those films that were rejected by the CCP because of their gender relations. This focus allows us to analyse moments in which a socialist ideology of gender was being specifically articulated through film and draws our attention to the politics of sexuality that haunted women's liberation in Maoist China.

At the 1956 Soviet Film Festival — the one attended by Vera Maretskaia — two films were screened exclusively for Chinese cinema leadership and Beijing film workers. The films were *Different Destinies* and *The Forty-First*.⁴⁷ While the Soviet reports on these screenings indicate that *The Forty-First* was warmly received and that Sovexportfilm received official requests to purchase both films for Chinese screens, it was not long before concerted discussion of the suitability of *The Forty-First* for mass circulation began within cinema circles.

The Forty-First, a film that won the Writing Laurel at Cannes in 1957, is the story of a female Bolshevik guard and her prisoner, a handsome White

46 The narrowing of possible subject positions from the more open debate that marked the emergence of the Chinese Communist Party and left-wing discourse on feminism and women's liberation in the Republican period is the broader historical context. See Wang Zheng, *Women and the Chinese Enlightenment: Oral and Textual Histories* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Tani E. Barlow, *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

47 RGALI, f. 2329, op. 12, d. 4033, l. 4, "Otchet o komandirovke gruppy sovkinorabotnikov v Kitai na kinofestival' sovfil'mov v KNR 5-24 noiabria 1956. Datirovan 4 ianvaria 1957 (Report on the Business Trip of Soviet Film Workers to China for the Soviet Film Festival of 5-24 November 1956 (dated 4 January 1957).," USSR Ministry of Culture, Foreign Relations Department, Socialist Countries Bureau.



Russian officer. They become romantically involved when stranded on a desert island. The storyline of the film is presumably recuperated by the political debates between the two lovers that culminate in an endorsement of the female protagonist's (played by Izolda Ivitskaya) championing of Bolshevism. The film is also marked by the stunning camera work of S. Ureusevsky.

In a conversation between the Soviet Minister of Culture, Mikhailov, and the head of the Chinese delegation at the negotiations for Cultural Cooperation in 1957, two opinions on *The Forty-First* were noted.⁴⁸

Critics believed the film would have a negative influence on youth because it encouraged love for the class enemy. Those who praised the film did so in spite of the story and because of the film's artistic merits.⁴⁹ In China, film heads were particularly concerned with the film's ending because they saw it as a return to the heroine's mistakes. While Mikhailov conceded in this conversation that the political ambiguity of the female character Maryutka was a result of insufficient Marxist training among creative workers, what we see in the issues raised by the Chinese is a discomfort with open expressions of love relations not triangulated by the party, and with the circulation of visual texts featuring ambiguous class loyalties. Moreover, the reaction to *The Forty-First*⁵⁰ — and its subsequent limited circulation in China — mirrors the concerns about the original film version of *White-Haired Girl*, in which, 1. Xi'er identifies with the landlord after becoming pregnant, and, 2. her father commits suicide rather than actively resist the landlord. In the revisions to *White-Haired Girl* of the 1960s, these ambiguities were removed.

Other examples, from the late 1950s and early 1960s, of Soviet films criticized or rejected by the Chinese follow a similar pattern and point to the desire

48 RGALI, f. 2329, op. 8, d. 509, l. 45, "Iz besedy ministra kul'tury Mikhailova s Tsan' Tsiun-zhuem, glavoi kitdelegatsii na peregovorakh o sost. Plana kul'tsotr. na (Notes from conversation between the Minister of Culture Mikhailov and the Head of the Chinese delegation during the negotiations for the Plan for Cultural Cooperation for 1957)," USSR Ministry of Culture, Foreign Relations Department, Socialist Countries Bureau.

49 An interviewee in 2002 indicated to me that *The Forty-First* was one of the first Soviet films that he viewed in the second half of the 1950s. Sichuan province film workers, Chengdu Sichuan, interviews by author, July 2002.

50 *The Forty-First* and *Cranes are Flying* inaugurated a wave of anti-war Russian films, such as Chukhrai's *The Ballad of a Soldier* (1959), Andrei Tarkovsky's *Ivan's Childhood* (1962), and Alexander Askoldov's *Commissar* (1968). The Chinese refusal to import these films was in part a response to the films' concerns with the daily difficulties of Soviet people's lives under socialism, which contradicted the ways in which Soviet and socialist lifestyle was being represented in China.

to remove particular expressions of female sexuality from nationalist and internationalist socialist imaginaries. In 1960 the Chinese declined to import *Cranes are Flying* and *Ballad of a Soldier*.⁵¹ As Thaw-era films, they participated in the redefinition of war heroism and introduction of personal emotions. In *Cranes are Flying* the protagonist Veronika sees her lover Boris go to war and while she waits for him with intensity and devotion, she also marries his cousin.⁵² The film's focus on love and betrayal, and the way in which some scenes state the party line only to challenge it with humour and human warmth, diverged from the Chinese socialist vision of the late 1950s. Class struggle, from the perspective of late 1950s and early 1960s Maoism, was no laughing matter and the lines of struggle and contradiction were to be sharpened, not blurred.



Tatiana Samoilova in
The Cranes are Flying.

The geopolitics of love as related to the Chinese decision not to import *Cranes are Flying* was summed up in comments made by Chinese Premier, Zhou Enlai, on 14 March 1959. Addressing what he saw as the ideological and artistic defects of *Cranes are Flying*, he stated: “It is hard to justify the behavior of the young woman, who betrayed her true and loyal friend. I understand why this film was liked by the Americans.”⁵³ Zhou’s comments reflected a Cold War rhetorical opposition that should not be overlooked: there was no room in a Chinese socialist ideology of gender for sexualized bodies that had a place within the United States. Since the founding in of the CCP in 1921, the party

51 RGALI, f. 2329, op. 8, d. 1180, l. 19, “Iz spravki o kul’stviziakh (dopolnenie k pervoi spravke?). Sostaviteli — Stepanov, Slavnov, Supagin, Novikov (Report on cultural cooperation [likely an addendum to original report]. Prepared by Stepanov, Slavnov, Supagin, Novikov).”

52 See Josephine Woll, *Real Images: Soviet Cinema and the Thaw* (I.B. Tauris, 2000); Josephine Woll, *The Cranes are Flying: The Film Companion* (I. B Tauris, 2003).

53 RGALI f 2329, op. 15, d. 24, l. 28, “Otchet glavnogo redaktora Otdela sovmestnykh postavok I. Chekina o sluzhebnoi komandirovke v KNR s 28.2 po 16.3 1959 g.-v svyazi s postanovkoi filma *Veter s Vostoka* (Report on the trip of I. Chekin, Chief Editor of the Joint Supplies Department of the Ministry of Culture to China between 28 February to 16 March, 1959 in connection with the Joint Production of the Film *Wind from the East*).”

used tropes of over-sexualized and therefore degraded women as a means to discredit capitalism, Republican China, and the United States.⁵⁴ These tropes were central to characterizations of American film as unhealthy and verging on pornographic. A 1950 article on this theme suggested that American films used sexual imagery to seduce the Chinese, and that watching American films was like smoking opium for the ways in which it enabled imperialism to flourish in China. The contrasting positive example, not surprisingly, was the Soviet film *The Fall of Berlin* and its star Marina Koveleva.⁵⁵ Within this context, Zhou Enlai's conclusion about why the United States would give a positive assessment to *Cranes are Flying* becomes more than a passing remark; women whose bodies complicate class and political lines are potentially dangerous international bodies. This concern with the ways in which the bodies of Soviet female stars might transgress borders of space, politics, and class was further enabled through propaganda materials sent by Sovexportfilm, in this case large amounts of booklets with photographs of well-known Soviet actresses, including Tatiana Samoilova in *Cranes are Flying* and Elena Bystritskaia in *Quiet Flows the Don*. Notably, with the negative evaluation of *Cranes are Flying* in China, Soviet film representatives criticized this practice of distributing glossy photographs and stated that the promotional materials China received had been designed for capitalist countries not socialist countries. According to the Soviet film workers, this oversight had contributed to the failure of *Cranes are Flying*.⁵⁶ The attention to the different gender systems in which *Cranes are Flying* circulated and the types of materials appropriate for capitalist and socialist identification with Soviet female film stars shows an astute awareness by the CPSU and CCP of how socialist film depicted and understood sexuality on the screen and within public discourse.

Despite the controversies surrounding certain films, *The Forty-First*, *Cranes are Flying*, and *Ballad of a Soldier* were screened apparently in limited form in urban areas of China. Generally speaking, controversial films circulated in the PRC in 35mm format rather than 16mm, thereby providing different forms of visual identification with female stars, depending on whether or not one inhabited urban or rural space. The films were not available for mass distribution to rural areas through mobile film projection units and had only limited runs in urban theatres, but they were often seen by students and intel-

54 For a discussion of how the sexualized enemy appeared in PRC film, especially the city of Shanghai, see Yomi Braester, "A Big Dying Vat: The Vilifying of Shanghai During the Good Eight Campaign," *Modern China* 31, no. 4 (2005): 411-47.

55 Gao Chou, "Mei yi dianying zhong de liangge wenti (The two problems of the films of imperialist America)," *Dazhong dianying* 13 (1950): 21.

56 RGALI f. 2918, op. 4, d. 589, l. 15-23, "Nekotorye voprosy razvitiia kino v KNR (informatsiia). Posol'stvo SSSR v KNR, Pekin (Information on the development of cinema in PRC. Embassy of the USSR in PRC, Beijing)," 20 May 1959.

lectuals. From the perspective of a politics of sexuality and socialist internationalism, this meant that in rural areas images of sexualized women, such as Samoilova in *Cranes are Flying*, who were loyal to the party but working through a complex range of emotions, were largely absent. By 1960 Soviet Thaw-era films did not move beyond the urban areas; instead pre-Thaw era Soviet films that had been released in China in the mid-1950s found renewed life. These films did not address the complexities of individual choices under socialism and in wartime life. They showcased heroes and heroines, such as those in *Pavel Korchagin* and *The Fall of Berlin*, whose life choices were beyond question.⁵⁷ Within this context, it is important to note that even *Korchagin*, a classic of early socialist realism, was remade so that in its 1956 version the love relations that appear in Ostrovsky's novel and the 1942 film were removed.⁵⁸

In terms of nation-wide screenings and access to Soviet female film stars, by 1963, with the increasingly difficult conditions in China for showing Soviet film, films selected by the CCP for purchase and/or screening were dominated by historical films and those that depicted the life of the Soviet people before the 20th Party Congress of 1956.⁵⁹ Within this context, available Soviet films included *The Fall of Berlin* and the re-release of *Zoya*. *Zoya* (dir. Lev Arnshtam, 1944) features a female heroine (*Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya* played by Galina Vodyanitskaya) unproblematicized by sexuality: it portrays the life of an 18-year old Moscow girl captured as a guerrilla fighter behind Nazi lines. The movie uses flashback scenes to show *Zoya's* childhood against torture footage by the Nazis. She embodies the female soldier as well as innocent childhood. In this respect, *Zoya* had a Chinese counterpart in Zhao Yiman, a Chinese guerrilla fighter who died a martyr when she refused to give names of CCP

57 RGALI, f. 2918, op. 4, d. 589, l. 32, "Nekotorye voprosy razvitiia kino v KNR (informatsiia). Posol'stvo SSSR v KNR, Pekin (Information on the development of cinema in PRC. Embassy of the USSR in PRC, Beijing)," 20 May 1959. Also, RGALI, f. 2918, op. 4, d. 590, l. 98, "Upoln. Mezkhknigi I. Kazennov predsedateliu Soveksportfil'ma Davydovu. 14 iuliia 1960 (Report by I. Kazennov, the representative of the International Book Publishers, to Davydov, the Chair of Soviet Export Film, 14 July 1960." As this document notes, the Soviet film delegation to China for the 40th anniversary of the October Revolution included three film people. One of these was the director of *Pavel Korchagin*, Vladimir Naumov, and the report states that this film was best received.

58 Yu Miin-ling "A Soviet Hero, Pavel Korchagin, Comes to China" (in Chinese), *New History* (December 2001). Another point to consider, as raised by He Donghui, is that in the 1960s the novel is moved from being publicly read to read in private, which enables specific forms of personal engagement with the desired bodies of the women in Pavel's life. He Donghui, "From Borrowing to Reclaiming the Brave New Work: Reception of the Essential Novel in China from 1949-1991," paper presented at "The Soviet Impact on China: Politics, Economy, Society, 1949-1991" Conference, Columbia University, 22-23 June 2007.

59 RGALI, f. 2918, op. 5, d. 205, l. 10, "Ot Kazennova — Davydovu (Letter from Kazennov to Davydov)," 15 November 1963.

members to the Japanese. Importantly, the filmed version of *Zhao Yiman* circulated in China alongside both the original release of *Zoya* in the early 1950s and its re-release in the 1960s.⁶⁰ The contemporaneous circulation of the two films, featuring young female soldier-heroines, consolidated the internationalist imaginary discussed in section two of this paper. Moreover, the films avoided any ambiguity of women without iron resolve because both women chose death over ambiguous loyalties.

The emphasis within Maoist revolutionary discourse in the 1960s and the desire to provide filmic examples of the Maoist maxim “do not fear hardship do not fear death” was further evident in one of the counter-examples to *Zoya* and *Zhao Yiman*. The Central Film Bureau in China rejected the Soviet film *Immortal Garrison* (1956). Even though the main plot of *Immortal Garrison* follows Soviet servicemen overcoming their desire to return to wives and loved ones and instead putting their energies into the siege at Brest, the Chinese authorities were concerned about the lack of resolve by the women soldiers and the isolation of the garrison from the actions of the Soviet armed forces. The problem, as far as Chinese authorities were concerned, was that the women soldiers surrendered and that actions beyond the immediate reach of the party were put forward for emulation.⁶¹ In this respect, the CCP (perhaps inadvertently) offered a critique of the gendered representations and spaces of resistance and armed struggle that characterized Soviet Thaw-era films, including *Immortal Garrison* and *Cranes are Flying*. In these films, women occupied domestic



Natasha (Marina Kovaleva) and Alesha (Boris Andreyev), The Fall of Berlin.

space and although their occupations and everyday lives showcased the education and training available to women in the Soviet Union, their patriotism was of a different nature than that of the soldier. The CCP critique of *Cranes are Flying* and *Immortal Garrison* was not framed as a challenge to the gendering of martyrdom, however because the concern was with betrayal, on one hand, and surrender, on

60 *Zoya* was one of the Stalinist classics, along with *The Battle of Stalingrad* and *The Fall of Berlin*, selected by the Chinese for the 1965 Soviet Film Festival.

61 RGALI, f. 2329, op. 8, d. 519, l. 36-37, “Spravka o khode vyponeniia plana meropriiatii po kul’tsotr. mezhdru SSSR i KNR na 1957 (k zasedaniiu Komiteta 21 noiabria 1957) (Report on the implementation of the Plan for Cultural Cooperation between the USSR and PRC for 1957),” 21 November 1957.

the other. What the CCP championed was militarized martyrdom as an expression of commitment to revolutionary struggle, and these were put forward as the parameters of the aesthetic and experiential possibilities for women.

But we should not jump to easy conclusions that the Maoist ideology of gender of the 1960s and its internationalist imagery erased sexualized bodies. On one hand, there is the rural-urban difference of access to sexualized Soviet bodies and the debates they engendered. Moreover, even those films that were considered the safest, like the paean to Stalin, *The Fall of Berlin*, had moments in which love relations and sexualized bodies could not be ignored. *The Fall of Berlin* culminates in a passionate kiss between the protagonists Alesha and Natasha in the fictionalized mass crowd scene of Stalin's arrival in Berlin at the moment of the city's liberation. Given that Chinese-produced films in this period are marked by a complete absence of kissing, even between couples legitimated by the state, there must have been some interest in this close-up kiss between Alesha and Natasha, even if this kiss takes place in front of Stalin and visually reinforces the triangulation of legitimate love, a triangulation of male-female-party that was also seen in *White-Haired Girl*. In *The Fall of Berlin*, the kiss stands out because it is the climax of the personal relationship that runs through the film and lends an erotic moment to the appropriation of individual love for patriotism and love for Stalin and Party. Moreover, the attractive face of Marina Kovaleva with slightly upturned chin featured prominently in press materials for the film in the 1950s and 1960s. Soviet representatives praised these press materials, unlike the glossy photos of Samoilova used to promote *Cranes are Flying*, for their high quality and ability to appeal to the Chinese masses.⁶² In the advertisement below, the eye moves from Stalin to Andreyev to Kovaleva in such a way that the love story interwoven with that of anti-Fascist struggle and socialist fortitude is reinforced but not overridden by its relationship to Stalinist iconography. The gaze of Andreyev and Kovaleva appears to settle on the same point, whereas Stalin is set apart from this gaze (in the advertisement if not in the film itself). In addition, Kovaleva's upturned chin and arched neck suggest the expected defiance against fascism and commitment to socialism, while also introducing a moment of yearning that could be read as yearning for Stalin, the socialist future, or her lover.

In urban areas we may speculate that viewers did not likely hold their breath for the kiss between Alesha and Natasha in front of Stalin because they had access to *Cranes are Flying* and *Quiet Flows the Don*. These films, reports indicate, were most popular in urban areas among intellectuals and young

62 RGALI, f. 2918, op. 2, d. 126, l. 67, "Iz otcheta tov. Loseva po rabote v Shankhae za fevral (From Comrade Losev's Report on the Work in Shanghai)," 28 March 1950.



Chinese advertisement for *The Fall of Berlin*. This photograph of Natasha (Marina Kovaleva) at the bottom left was frequently used in Chinese media materials.

people, especially students, and glossy photographs circulated of the sexualized female actresses.⁶³ Urban viewers of this period thus had access to relatively more diverse expressions of sexuality than their rural counterparts. The urban aesthetic framework provided spaces where certain manifestations of personal/political conflicts of love and desire could be discussed. These tensions, after all, were embodied by the intense and stunning Samoilova in *Cranes are Flying* and *Anna Karenina*. But even while the CCP limited access to this visual imagery — and formally criticized such films as the products of Soviet revisionism — love, desire, and sexuality was not erased or censored to the point of erasure. As I have already discussed, the bodies of Soviet actresses, including Marina Kovaleva in *The Fall of Berlin* and Galina Vodyanitskaya in *Zoya*, circulated alongside those of Chinese actresses

Tian Hua in *White-Haired Girl* and Zhu Xijuan in *Red Detachment of Women*, and they did so within the larger frameworks of socialist love and sexuality of the periods.⁶⁴

It is in this juxtaposition of celebrated and sanctioned couplings of Chinese and Soviet film heroines that the ways in which film was informed by theories attributed to emulation campaigns becomes evident. One goal of the CCP was to provide positive examples and remove negative ones, a goal which, as Julian Chang has remarked, also called upon positive examples to draw attention

63 Other reports state that *Quiet Flows the Don* was popular throughout China, along with *Village Schoolteacher* and *The Fall of Berlin*. I am still working through the extent to which these conflicting reports reflect larger trends.

64 Chen Xiaomei discusses sexuality as linked to the body of the character of Wu Qionghua in *Red Detachment of Women*, particularly in the ballet version. Chen Xiaomei, *Acting the Right Part*. Also, in light of the discussion above about the kiss in the Chinese context between Alesha and Natasha in *The Fall of Berlin*, Xie Jin, the director of *Red Detachment of Women* (1961), originally intended to include a love story between the hero and heroine but did not pursue this line because of political opposition.

away from other experiential possibilities.⁶⁵ As the above examples demonstrate, the values attributed to — and placed upon — the bodies of Soviet (and Chinese) female film stars outlined the contours of what were acceptable and unacceptable emotions, sexuality, and experiences.

Chinese viewers in the 1950s and 1960s were constantly provided with female bodies that enacted specific forms of sexualized and desexualized liberation. This liberation rested upon various lines of aestheticized identification. But, too often, scholars have focused on Chinese films in isolation from the internationalist and transnational contexts in which they were viewed. What we can see in the circulation of Soviet films in China, and the presence of aestheticized Soviet women in the everyday lives of Chinese women, is that these bodies were heavily politicized and intimately connected to Chinese socialism as a national and international project. Soviet women alternately reinforced and challenged Maoist precepts about revolution, love, and desire; but the continued importance placed on dissemination of Soviet materials throughout the Maoist period reminds us that an internationalist imaginary was not simply a convenient device to promote political loyalty in the 1950s when Sino–Soviet relations were at their most friendly; nor was a politics of love and sexuality peripheral to the debates over socialism and Maoist global imaginings. Rather, the very ways in which Maoism imagined female agency and subjectivity — and created or delimited spaces for its enactment — was contingent on connecting particular female bodies across national spaces and invoking internationalist communities in urban and rural spaces. By looking at Soviet female film stars in the PRC we can begin to think about how Sino–Soviet relations and debates about the correct form of (global) socialism were intimately tied to debates about love, desire, and sexuality, as central facets of internationalism and the aesthetic experiences of womanhood in Maoist China.

* * *

TINA MAI CHEN is Associate Professor of History at the University of Manitoba. Her research interests are in modern Chinese history, gender, nationalism, film, and transnationalism. She is the co-editor (with David Churchill) of *Film, History, and Cultural Citizenship* (Routledge, 2007). She is currently working on a manuscript entitled *Electric Shadows and Everyday Internationalism: Soviet Film and the Making of Maoist China*.

TINA MAI CHEN est professeure agrégée en histoire à l'Université du

65 Julian Chang, "The Mechanics of State Propaganda: The People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union in the 1950s," in *New Perspectives on State Socialism in China*, eds., Cheek and Saich, 107-8.

Manitoba. Ses intérêts en recherche portent sur l'histoire de la Chine moderne, les rapports hommes-femmes, le nationalisme, le cinéma, et le transnationalisme. Elle est coéditrice (avec David Churchill) de *Film, History, and Cultural Citizenship* (Routledge, 2007). Elle travaille actuellement à un manuscrit intitulé *Electric Shadows and Everyday Internationalism: Soviet Film and the Making of Maoist China*.