

Crossings: Asian Cinema and Media Culture

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Working the System: Motion Picture, Filmmakers, and Subjectivities in Mao-Era China, 1949–1966

Qiliang He

Working the System

Motion Picture, Filmmakers, and Subjectivities in
Mao-Era China, 1949–1966

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Introduction

In October 1980, Zhao Dan 趙丹 (1915–1980), a superstar film actor who had risen to fame in the mid-1930s and spent years in prison during the tumultuous Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), died of cancer. Shortly before his death, Zhao made some incisive comments on the relationship between the party-state and artists in China. In his deathbed essay, “There Is No Hope for Literature and the Arts If They Are Regulated Too Specifically” (*Guande taijuti, wenyi mei xiwang* 管得太具體，文藝沒希望), Zhao explicitly called on the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to relinquish its control over culture and arts in post-Mao times.¹ This essay has long been interpreted as the final chapter of this film star’s lifelong struggle with the CCP’s intervention in filmmaking, inspiring Yingjin Zhang to hail Zhao as both a movie star and a “real-life martyr” in the history of Chinese film.² Zhao’s putative martyrdom typifies a long-held assumption about the uneasy relationship between the interventionist party-state and the docile or recalcitrant artists/performers in the Mao Zedong era (1949–1976), and such an assumption has profoundly shaped the existing studies on the party’s efforts to refashion Chinese culture in post-1949 China.

The present book, by comparison, calls into question the prevailing paradigm—a presumption that post-1949 artists and scholars were either cooperative with or resistant to the oppressive state—by examining the careers and day-to-day lives of five highly accomplished film directors based in Shanghai. I argue that the resistance/accommodation binary was oftentimes ex-post constructions and, therefore, differed markedly from those filmmakers’ lived experiences during the early years of the People’s Republic of China (PRC, 1949–present). Rather than offering another historical account of how the moviemakers willingly subscribed to the party’s ideologies or mightily struggled with them, this study underscores how the changing political climates and unstable party policies in Mao’s China enabled those

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1. Zhao Dan, “Guande tai juti, wenyi mei xiwang” 管得太具體，文藝沒希望 [There is no hope for literature and the arts if they are regulated too specifically], *Renmin ribao* 人民日報 [People’s Daily], October 10, 1980.
 2. Yingjin Zhang, “Zhao Dan: Spectrality of Martyrdom and Stardom,” in *Chinese Film Stars*, eds., Mary Farquhar and Yingjin Zhang (London: Routledge, 2010), 86–87.

filmmakers to create, maintain, and adjust their newfound subjectivities under this new sociopolitical system.

To this end, this book focuses on a pantheon of preeminent Shanghai-based filmmakers to investigate the making of the new citizenry in Mao-era China. The protagonists of the book represent a full spectrum of film directors: Zheng Junli 鄭君里 (1911–1969), Sun Yu 孫瑜 (1900–1990), and Wu Yonggang 吳永剛 (1907–1982), seasoned moviemakers who had earned considerable reputations before the founding of the PRC, Zhao Dan, a film superstar-turned-director whose fame peaked in the 1950s and 1960s, and Xie Jin 謝晉 (1923–2008), a rising star who came into prominence after 1949. Rather than presenting a hagiography of Shanghai-based film directors, the present book portrays them as ordinary people in the early years of the PRC who strove to survive the new sociopolitical system established by the CCP and were simultaneously eager to reap benefits from it. Their checkered careers and stressful personal experiences thus provide compelling case studies on how individuals' subjectivities took shape in a socialist regime.

Given film's unrivaled popularity across the country as a mass-consumed cultural product and its widespread use as an instrument of ideological indoctrination in post-1949 China, motion picture directors took on special significance as both a key component part of the PRC's propaganda machine—"the enunciator of revolutionary ideology"³ or the constructor of "socialist subject"⁴—and the very target of the party's thought reform or ideological remodeling, a CCP-led campaign "to refashion mind-sets and instill new ways of thinking."⁵ These directors were tasked with producing movies to reeducate the masses and thereby transform the latter into the Marxian "new man,"⁶ who was expected to "make history and perpetuate revolution."⁷ However, veteran directors, who had risen in esteem well before the founding of the PRC, could hardly win the party's favor because of their "very interesting" but "highly untidy" backgrounds.⁸ It was thus vital that those filmmakers underwent rounds of "brainwashing," replacing their "old ideas with new ones,"⁹ before they were allowed to produce films to disseminate communist ideologies. Film's cardinal importance as an instrument of state propaganda and

3. Yomi Braester, *Witness Against History: Literature, Film, and Public Discourse in Twentieth-Century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 117.

4. Xiaoning Lu, *Moulding the Socialist Subject: Cinema and Chinese Modernity (1949–1966)* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 4.

5. Aminda M. Smith, *Thought Reform and China's Dangerous Classes: Reeducation, Resistance, and the People* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012), 4.

6. Maurice Meisner, *Mao Zedong: A Political and Intellectual Portrait* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2007), 147.

7. Yinghong Cheng, *Creating the "New Man": From Enlightenment Ideals to Socialist Realities* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009), 1. Also, Yu Miin-ling (Yu Minling 余敏伶), *Xingsu "xinren": Zhonggong xuanchuan yu Sulian jingyan 形塑 "新人": 中共宣傳與蘇聯經驗* [Shaping the new man: CCP propaganda and Soviet experiences] (Taipei: Zhongyang yanjiu yuan jindaishi yanjiu suo, 2015), 2–11.

8. Paul G. Pickowicz, *China on Film: A Century of Exploration, Confrontation, and Controversy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012), 190.

9. Cheng, *Creating the "New Man"*, 3.

an indispensable pastime for the general population and the CCP's lack of complete confidence in film directors, as this book will show, led to a heavy irony. In most cases, opinions to reaffirm the directors' central role in making films were denounced as heretical. For the CCP authorities, such "director-centrism" (*daoyan zhongxin lun* 導演中心論) hinted at the film artists' rejection of the party's leadership in the film industry. However, directors were invariably singled out as the convenient scapegoats for ideologically questionable and politically incorrect filmic works in all political campaigns despite the CCP's avowed denial of "director-centrism."

The Relationship between the Party and Artists in Mao-Era China

The CCP authorities' intimate but strained relationship with moviemakers exemplified the party-state's general attitudes towards artists in China during the first three decades of the PRC. Recent scholarship has addressed the tension between the party's efforts to co-opt artists or cultural workers to advance its agenda to transform China, socially and culturally, and its eagerness to reeducate the latter and thereby refashion Chinese culture. The PRC government at various levels enlisted support from painters,¹⁰ folklorists,¹¹ grassroots musicians,¹² dramatists,¹³ and singing girls,¹⁴ among others, to appropriate the existing art forms and to appeal to and edify the masses. While the PRC state kept alive the tradition of *jiaohua* 教化 (moral transformation) to effect changes to Chinese culture,¹⁵ artists and performers also took the initiative to advance the CCP's agenda of reforming Chinese culture by proscribing "many conventions of previous art"¹⁶ and censoring their own works.¹⁷ The CCP's success in winning over the artists and entertainers did not necessarily result from mere coercion. In the world of filmmaking, Greg Lewis notes that "substantial members of Maoist film artists" were more cooperative with the CCP, at least before 1957, than conventional wisdom allows us to believe.¹⁸ Paul

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10. Julia F. Andrews, "Traditional Painting in New China: Guohua and the Anti-Rightist Campaign," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 49, no. 3 (August 1990): 559.
 11. Marja Kaikonen, "Quyi: Will It Survive?" in *The Eternal Storyteller: Oral Literature in Modern China*, ed. Vibeke Bordahl (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1999), 64; Chang-tai Hung, "Reeducating a Blind Storyteller: Han Qixiang and the Chinese Storytelling Campaign," *Modern China* 19, no. 4 (October 1993): 395.
 12. Frederick Lau, "Forever Red: The Invention of Solo *dizi* Music in Post-1949," *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* 5 (1996): 127.
 13. Brian James DeMare, *Mao's Cultural Army: Drama Troupes in China's Rural Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 3.
 14. Mi Zhao, "From Singing Girl to Revolutionary Artist: Female Entertainers Remembering China's Socialist Past (1949–The Present)," *Twentieth-Century China* 39, no. 2 (May 2014): 172.
 15. Hsiao-t'i Li, *Opera, Society, and Politics in Modern China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), 255.
 16. Julia F. Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China, 1949–1979* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 2.
 17. Jerome Silbergeld, *Contradictions: Artistic Life, the Socialist State, and the Chinese Painter Li Huasheng* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1993), 2.
 18. Greg Lewis, "The History, Myth, and Memory of Maoist Chinese Cinema, 1949–1966," *Asian Cinema* 16, no. 1 (March 2005): 179.

Pickowicz reasons that the film circles in Shanghai wholeheartedly sided with the CCP in the early 1950s because of a heightened expectation that the new communist regime would implement strict measures to shield China-made films against the aggression of Hollywood movies.¹⁹

However, scholars have highlighted the CCP's establishment of its absolute authority and imposition of its will to bring about fundamental changes to Chinese culture, ideologically and artistically. Such changes were usually effected through disciplining, silencing, and even penalizing the artists or performers. Chang-tai Hung interprets the cooperation between the artists and the state as "a planned political maneuver directed from above," with which the CCP exerted "its authority by setting in no uncertain terms the limits of artistic expression."²⁰ Similarly, in her study on Yue opera (*Yueju* 越劇), an operatic form popular mainly in the Yangzi Delta, Jin Jiang posits that the PRC state "took responsibility for both the content of the production and the entertainers' livelihoods" since 1949.²¹ Mark Bender also finds that the political authorities became the sole arbiter of folklorist arts and the driving force behind their artistic innovation in post-revolutionary China.²²

As the CCP had long attached special significance to film, the party-state allegedly took "nearly monopolistic control" over the production, distribution, and criticism of movies.²³ To ensure that the party leadership became the sole "spectatorial position" of films in post-1949 China,²⁴ the world of Chinese cinema bore the brunt of state intervention. The nationwide campaign of criticizing *The Life of Wu Xun* (*Wu Xun zhuan* 武訓傳, 1951, dir. Sun Yu), a biographical movie centering on Wu Xun 武訓 (1838–1896), a peasant from modern-day Shandong who earned his reputation for raising funds for children's education as a beggar in the late eighteenth century, turned out to be the first political campaign against culture and arts in the PRC's history. It signaled the onset of the "absolute supremacy of politics over art in China"²⁵ and led to the demise of privately owned film studios in Shanghai and the nationalization of the film industry in China.²⁶ After that, Shanghai-based filmmakers came under the CCP's centralized management with the establishment of Shanghai United Film Studio (*Shanghai lianhe dianying zhipian chang* 上海聯合

19. Pickowicz, *China on Film*, 162.

20. Hung, "Reeducating a Blind Storyteller," 420.

21. Jin Jiang, *Women Playing Men: Yue Opera and Social Change in Twentieth-Century Shanghai* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009), 184.

22. Mark Bender, *Plum and Bamboo: China's Suzhou Chantefable Tradition* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 16–18.

23. Pickowicz, *China on Film*, 209.

24. Stephanie Hemelryk Donald, *Public Secrets, Public Spaces: Cinema and Civility in China* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 59.

25. Yingjin Zhang, *Chinese National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2004), 195.

26. Zhang, *Chinese National Cinema*, 199; Qizhi 啓之, *Mao Zedong shidai de renmin dianying, 1949–1966 nian* 毛澤東時代的人民電影, 1949–1966年 [The people's cinema in the Mao Zedong era, 1949–1966] (Taipei: Xiuwei zixun keji gufen youxian gongsi, 2010), 115; Zhuoyi Wang, *Revolutionary Cycles in Chinese Cinema, 1951–1979* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014), 8–9.

in order to serve their best interests nor guaranteed their safety amid political storms. Therefore, they were by no means “innocent” individuals facing the communist regime’s oppression. Rather, they at times made fawning contributions to popularizing the state-sponsored ideologies and building a socialist society in China. Simply put, they were entangled with the party-state. Here, “entanglement” refers to a process of molding new citizenry in socialist regimes where individuals became “entangled” with the party-states as long as they had a grip on the narratives created by the communist regimes.⁷² Therefore, it was unnecessary to differentiate their sincere acceptance of the communist ideologies from their parroting of the CCP’s rhetoric: they could well do both. What mattered was that the filmmakers constantly adjusted their tactics, particularly in their filmmaking activities, to maximize the benefits and minimize the disadvantages. Rather than exploring their a priori subjectivities as resisters to or collaborators of the communist regime, the entire book underscores the process of making their subjectivities. Their checkered film careers revealed that they not only acclimated themselves to the ever-changing political atmosphere of Mao-era China but also sought to obtain benefits from it.

Chapter Design

Working the System centers on five film directors based in post-1949 Shanghai to explore their different ways of coming to terms with the novel politico-cultural system in Mao-era China. Chapter 1 centers on Zheng Junli, who was unfortunately drawn into the political maelstrom during the campaign of criticizing *The Life of Wu Xun* in the early 1950s. In the remainder of this decade, nevertheless, Zheng managed to redeem himself and win back his reputation as a first-rate director by directing a number of attention-grabbing historical/biographical films, such as *Song Jingshi* 宋景詩 (1955), *Nie Er*, and *Lin Zexu*. Given *Song Jingshi*’s status as the first Chinese movie centering on a peasant uprising leader and assessing the revolution of the peasant in a positive light, it was evident that Zheng deployed a tactic of fully subscribing to the CCP-endorsed historiography to reinterpret China’s history in imperial times. This chapter argues that filmmakers like Zheng were not just enunciators of communist historiographical and ideological notions but their major contributors and propagators.

Chapter 2 highlights Zhao Dan’s remarkable success as both a film star and a director in the 1950s and 1960s. Beginning in the mid-1930s, a host of highly successful films had catapulted Zhao into stardom. Despite this, he got off to a rocky start in the opening years of the PRC, when he endured heavy pressure because of the nationwide campaign against *The Life of Wu Xun*. Since the mid-1950s, however,

72. Stefan Arvidsson, Jakub Beneš, and Anja Kirsch, “Introduction: Socialist Imaginations,” in *Socialist Imaginations: Utopias, Myths, and the Masses*, ed. Stefan Arvidsson, Jakub Beneš, and Anja Kirsch (London: Routledge, 2019), 7.

Zhao staged a glorious comeback by starring in several blockbuster movies, including the two anniversary films directed by Zheng Junli. He also began to chart new territory in filmmaking by directing several films during the Great Leap Forward (1958–1960) and beyond. Zhao's rise to superstardom under socialism resulted from his ability to mobilize all the resources accessible to him: his popularity ever since the 1930s, his intimate relationship with high-ranking officials in Beijing, including Zhou Enlai 周恩來 (1898–1976) and Jiang Qing 江青 (1914–1991), and his newly minted party membership. Meanwhile, his rise to fame as an exemplary artist or intellectual with the help of the political authorities and the CCP's endeavor to expand the national film market further allowed him to gain unprecedentedly wide recognition across the country. After 1949, the CCP established a national film distribution and projection network, including rural film projection teams that would travel the countryside, allowing movie stars to enjoy a much larger audience than they had before national liberation. Film attendance across China increased nearly one hundredfold between 1949 (47 million) and 1959 (4,170 million).⁷³ Therefore, the making of his stardom and a socialist model worker—or his new subjectivity in the PRC—was made possible because of both artistic and political reasons.

In comparison with the two relatively successful filmmakers examined in Chapters 1 and 2, the protagonists in Chapters 3 and 4 had to grapple with the problem of not losing the CCP's favor. The third chapter investigates Sun Yu's recourse to his familiar filmic technique—invoking the image of the female body to metaphorize China's nation-building efforts. *Braving the Wind and Waves*, the only color film in Sun's film career, depicts the growth and maturation of an energetic and passionate young woman who ended up becoming the PRC's first-generation female steamship captain. To popularize the PRC-sponsored notion of gender equality and women's emancipation, I argue, director Sun Yu brought back his interpretation of the connectedness between women and the Chinese nation in his 1934 film, *Queen of Sports*. However, Sun's strategy of "putting new wine into old bottles" could hardly convince the political authorities and fell short of helping him reestablish his status as a star filmmaker. In other words, this subjectivizing practice proved futile, and Sun was thereafter marginalized professionally and politically.

The protagonist of Chapter 4, Wu Yonggang, took the most dramatic plunge in professional standing of the filmmakers discussed in this book. He earned one of the highest ranks among filmmakers shortly after Liberation but was singled out as the black sheep during the Anti-Rightist Movement in 1957. The relatively relaxing political climate in the early 1960s enabled Wu to regain his status as a director, if only for opera films. Despite this, Wu's *The Jade Hairpin* (*Biyu zan* 碧玉簪, 1962), a coproduced opera film between a Shanghai-based film studio and a Hong Kong left-wing motion picture company, notched up phenomenal market success in Hong Kong. More importantly, Wu capitalized on this opportunity and took advantage

73. Zhang, *Chinese National Cinema*, 192.

of the unique cinematic Cold War environment to unleash his pent-up resentment and articulate his desire to conciliate with the party, that is, his victimizer. In other words, while the CCP authorities weaponized opera films to wage a cultural war in the Hong Kong and overseas markets, those movies endowed Wu with an otherwise inaccessible means to express himself and attain a certain degree of artistic autonomy.

Chapter 5 highlights Xie Jin, the youngest director of the five in this book. Xie benefited from the CCP leadership's unspoken agenda to push aside old-generation directors, such as Sun Yu and Wu Yonggang, and make way for the younger ones. Despite his uneasy relationship with the CCP cadres in the Shanghai-based film studio, he managed to produce a series of high-profile, award-winning films that commanded enormous viewership nationwide and across the globe. Notwithstanding such marked success, the friction between strong-willed Xie and the nosy supervisors, inspectors, and censors proved demoralizing but unintentionally led to the "co-authorship" or "multilayered authorship" of practically all his films.⁷⁴ Hence, it is fair to argue that the party policies and the political authorities' interventionism were at once enabling, empowering, and restraining factors behind the lionization of Xie as a rising star in the film firmament and the creation of his peculiar directorial style known as the "Xie Jin mode of cinema," that is, associating "the grand narrative of the nation" to "the vicissitudes of individual lives"—especially those of women—and using the mode of family melodrama to interpret the PRC's sociopolitical order.⁷⁵

74. Xiao Liu, "Red Detachment of Women: Revolutionary Melodrama and Alternative Socialist Imaginations," *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 26, no. 3 (2015): 119.

75. Lu, *Moulding the Socialist Subject*, 59.

“Putting New Wine into Old Bottles”

Sun Yu's Filmic Career in Post-1949 China

Like Zhao Dan, Sun Yu, one of China's second-generation directors, was a principal victim of the national campaign against *The Life of Wu Xun* in the early 1950s. Although he managed to escape political persecution after submitting a 300-word confession,¹ Sun, unlike Zheng Junli, would not gain recognition from the CCP authorities in the decades to follow. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Sun was assigned to make only three relatively little-known films, *Brave the Wind and Waves* (1957), *The Tale of Lu Ban* (*Lu Ban de chuanshuo* 魯班的傳說, 1958), and *Qin Niangmei* (*Qin Niangmei* 秦娘美, 1960), and failed to restore his reputation as a first-tier director. In Ding Yaping's 丁亞平 words, such a preeminent director was no longer “a hero able to galvanize the audiences” in post-1949 China.² Sun's falling out of favor of the party and slipping into obscurity hence exemplify the marginalization of the second-generation directors, arguably “the cream of Shanghai film's ‘golden era.’”³ Tony Ryans hails the second-generation directors as the “highest achievers” in pre-1949 China because of their “talent, energy, imagination and ingenuity.” Nevertheless, after 1949, many of them were consigned to tragic fates amid numerous political campaigns.⁴

The dominant narrative—in both biographies/memoirs and scholarly research published after the late 1970s—about the CCP's total suppression of old-generation filmmakers, politically as well as artistically, has been highly influential. Taiwan-based film critic Ch'en Hui-yang 陳輝揚 argues that Sun lost touch with everyday life during PRC times, and, therefore, his productions after 1949 paled in comparison with those before 1949.⁵ Most historians and critics are similarly under

1. “Sun Yu shi shenme huose” 孫瑜是什麼貨色 [What on earth is Sun Yu], *Hongqi zhanbao* 紅旗戰報 [Red flag Battlefield Report], no. 6 (1967): 8.
2. Ding Yaping 丁亞平, *Zai lishi de bianji* 在歷史的邊緣 [On the margins of history] (Beijing: Beijing shidai huawen shuju, 2015), 370.
3. Gina Marchetti, “Two Stage Sisters: The Blossoming of a Revolutionary Aesthetic,” in *Transnational Chinese Cinemas: Identity, Nationhood, Gender*, ed. Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997), 60.
4. Tony Ryans, “The Second Generation,” in *Electric Shadows: A Century of Chinese Cinema*, ed. James Bell (London: British Film Institute, 2014), 16–18.
5. Chen Huiyang (Ch'en Hui-yang 陳輝揚), *Mengying ji: Zhongguo dianying yinxiang* 夢影集：中國電影印象 [Anthology of dream and shadow: An impression on Chinese film] (Taipei: Yuncheng wenhua, 1990), 43.

the impression that Sun, unfortunately, sank into oblivion because of the lack of job opportunities in the 1950s and 1960s. Most intriguingly, Jay Leyda erroneously stated in his seminal work, *Dianying*, that he could find “no record of Sun Yu working again after the mistakes of Wu Hsun [*The Life of Wu Xun*].”⁶ Some scholars even assert that, artistically, Sun had “died” in Mao-era China as the campaign against *The Life of Wu Xun* dealt him a huge blow.⁷ Assertions made by Leyda and other scholars thus indicate the total obscurity of the three films directed by this experienced and reputed director during the PRC era, particularly *Brave the Wind and Waves*, another of Sun’s controversial films in the 1950s.

This chapter focuses on *Brave the Wind and Waves* and Sun Yu’s career in Mao’s China. It highlights Sun’s tactic to carve out a niche for himself in the world of film in the 1950s and tackle an identity crisis faced by all second-generation directors despite the lingering trauma he went through during the campaign of criticizing *The Life of Wu Xun*. The tactic, I argue, was “putting new wine into old bottles”—or his recourse to the familiar filmic techniques to make a film to eulogize the new socio-political system and the new citizenry in the PRC. To this end, Sun wholeheartedly devoted himself to producing *Brave the Wind and Waves* in 1957, to glorify China’s first-generation women steamship navigators. The movie centers on Liang Ying 梁瓔 (Huang Yin 黃音) and two other female apprentices who have freshly graduated from a professional school and initially work as trainees on *The People 91* (*Renmin 91 hao* 人民91號). After overcoming all the barriers, including the captain’s blatant discrimination against women, Liang is promoted as third mate within fifteen months, establishing a record in the nation. Meanwhile, Liang and her colleague Ma Jun 馬駿 (Zhongshu Huang 中叔皇 [1925–2005]) pledge their love to each other because of their shared commitment to building socialism in China.

Although this movie has been dismissed as formulaic, bland, and lacking the unique attractiveness that defines most of Sun Yu’s pre-1949 films, attesting to the director’s loss of his creativity,⁸ *Brave the Wind and Waves* allowed Sun to experiment with a new film genre—“lyric comedy” (*shuqing xiju* 抒情喜劇), or “light comedy” (*qing xiju* 輕喜劇). Representing the realities in a light-hearted and humorous way did not considerably deviate from Sun’s longstanding directorial style, for he had already emphasized his films’ entertainment in the past several decades.⁹ For Sun and many other directors in China who “rediscovered” comedy in 1957 and 1958, comedy provided a necessary means to illustrate a peaceful day-to-day life in the PRC without the “dramatic tension” usually seen in revolutionary and war films.¹⁰ Although the revival of comedy in the mid- and late 1950s

6. Leyda, *Dianying*, 223.

7. Chen Mo 陳墨, *Yingtian jiuozong* 影壇舊蹤 [The trace in the past in the world of film] (Nanchang: Jiangxi jiaoyu chubanshe, 2000), 95.

8. Chen, *Mengying ji*, 72.

9. Sun, *Yinghai fanzhou*, 229.

10. Clark, *Chinese Cinema*, 65.

has been hailed as one of the few impressive accomplishments achieved during the Hundred Flowers Campaign,¹¹ scholars studying satirical comedy films and their political implications usually ignore *Brave the Wind and Waves*, in no small part because this film and Sun Yu did not officially face the CCP's political persecution in the 1950s. In comparison with satirical comedy, however, light comedy, which focused on the contradictions between "the advanced" and the "backward" political thoughts in socialist China but not on the violent clashes between the CCP and its foes,¹² would gain steam in the following decade. As this film's cameraman noted that light comedy as a genre was rare in the 1950s,¹³ it would prevail in the early 1960s with the release of a number of popular and award-winning productions, such as *Li Shuangshuang* (*Li Shuangshuang* 李雙雙, dir. Lu Ren 魯軻, 1962). In this sense, *Brave the Wind and Waves* was a trailblazer in the PRC's film history. Sun thus succeeded in brewing "new wine"—light comedy—with his "old bottles"—his recognition of film as entertainment as well as a means of moral inculcation.

To give a vivid portrayal of the heroines and champion new womanhood in this historical age, Sun Yu refocused on women's images as he did in many of his 1930s films. Back in the 1930s, Sun had already earned a reputation for modeling his works after those of Josef von Sternberg (1894–1969) and turning his attention to women on the screen.¹⁴ In a string of films in this decade, Sun endeavored to find an eclectic way to combine the "modern consciousness of patriotism with traditional strengths of Chinese women—wisdom, self-sacrifice, care, and endurance."¹⁵ The same formula was still valid in *Brave the Wind and Waves*, in which women's self-sacrifice and perseverance enabled them to make contributions to China's socialist modernization.

The specific type of womanhood Sun Yu had established on the screen sometimes entailed displaying young women's bodies. Therefore, when treating the female body in *Brave the Wind and Waves*, Sun's tactic of putting new wine into old bottles seemed a little awkward. Paul Pickowicz argues that Sun's heroines in some of his films before 1949 radiated "a natural, spontaneous sexuality."¹⁶ Although Sun similarly tried to exhibit women's bodies in the very beginning of *Brave the Wind and Waves*, as this chapter will show, he quickly relinquished the strategy of linking women's sexual appeal to China's modernity and subscribed to the "degendering" (*qu xingbie hua* 去性別化) approach in the remaining portion of the film. After all, as Chris Berry posits, the "viewing subject" in the PRC was not expected to

11. Clark, "Two Hundred Flowers on China's Screens," 75.

12. Sun, *Yinghai fanzhou*, 228.

13. Dai Weiyu 戴維宇, "Manyi wozhe 50 nian" 漫憶我這50年 [Random memories of fifty years in my life], in *Suiyue shibeii* 歲月拾貝 [Collecting treasure in history], ed. Wang Xijian 王晞建 (Beijing: Zhongguo guangbo dianshi chubanshe, 2002), 253.

14. Ryans, "The Second Generation," 21.

15. Yihong Pan, "Crafting the 'New Woman' in China's Left-Wing Cinema of the 1930s: Sun Yu's Three Films," *Frontier of History in China* 6, no. 2 (2011): 279.

16. Pickowicz, *China on Film*, 52.

be “engaged in libidinally.” Instead, the relationship between the camera (and, by extension, the viewers) and the female protagonist was supposed to be between the parent and the “unmarried daughter.”¹⁷ Despite this, *Brave the Wind and Waves* would soon come under criticism in the late 1950s for “lacking warm feelings toward the working class” and having “old, petit-bourgeois tendencies.”¹⁸ After the failures of his first two films released in PRC times, Sun’s quest for his subjectivity as a worthy director and a contributor to the CCP’s socialist cause failed.

The Storyline

Brave the Wind and Waves begins with the commencement at Chaoshan Advanced Navigation School (*Chaoshan gaoji shangchuan jishu xuexiao* 潮汕高級商船技術學校), from which the poorly disciplined female protagonists, Liang Ying and her classmates, are initially absent. They struggle to paddle a boat on the ocean when the ceremony starts and, therefore, are late for it. After graduation, the three are sent to work in Shanghai as trainees. Touring the bank of Huangpu River (*Huangpu jiang* 黃浦江), Liang Ying happens to see an inexperienced sailor falling into the river from the steamship *The People 91*. While Liang volunteers to save the young man from drowning, she comes under fire from Ma Jun, the boatswain, and Captain Zhao (Zhang Yi 張翼 [1909–1983]) for her excessive boldness. It turns out that *The People 91* is the three young women’s designated workplace during their internship. For all his rich work experience and superb navigation skill, Captain Zhao has a deep-rooted prejudice against women: he believes that a male apprentice will have to spend at least eight or nine years mastering necessary skills, and the three young women’s vow to become competent navigators in a short period, therefore, seems absurd.

On *The People 91*, the three female trainees kick in their new careers. Like their male colleagues, they engage in physical labor, such as pulling mooring ropes and cleaning the deck. Meanwhile, they learn nautical theories and practices day in and day out. Under the help of the party committee, the three young women manage to complete their internship in merely eight months. As the other two girls are transferred elsewhere, Liang Ying stays on *The People 91*. On one occasion, the ailing Liang attempts to steer the steamship through a difficult waterway but sends the wrong instruction. Captain Zhao thus gives her a severe reprimand. Stressed out and exhausted, Liang faints and then suffers from a high fever for a few days. On her sickbed, Liang is heard mumbling nautical terms in her somniloquy. Liang’s professionalism deeply touches Political Commissar Li 李 and Captain Zhao, who

17. Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar, *China on Screen: Cinema and Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 110–13.

18. Clark, *Chinese Cinema*, 78.

are escorting the patient in the cabin. Meanwhile, the boatswain begins to show his admiration for the female protagonist's perseverance.

Liang Ying passes the test several months later and becomes the third mate. During the Labor Day break, the three women reunite in Wuhan. They put on their uniforms to participate in the celebratory procession and go to the party together. On that day, Liang Ying rejects the first mate's courtship attempt, for she despises this man's selfishness and lack of passion for work. Finally, she establishes a romantic relationship with Ma Jun, the boatswain, because of their shared political beliefs and convictions. At the end of the movie, Liang Ying is promoted to second mate and proudly becomes one of the first-generation female steamship navigators in post-1949 China.

The Production of the Film

The prototype of *The People 91* was the steamship *The People 9* (*Renmin 9 hao* 人民9號), on which director Sun Yu and his colleagues spent nineteen days observing the everyday life and routine work of the crew on board. According to Sun, he was keenly interested in *The People 9* because of an essay he happened to read:

I read the essays published in the fifth issue of *New Chinese Women* (*Xin Zhongguo funü* 新中國婦女) about Lin Youhua 林幼華, the first woman [steamship] navigator on the Yangzi River, in June and July 1955. [I] was deeply moved by the protagonist's fearlessness of difficulties and tenacious efforts. I believed that [the story about Lin] was a superb example of how our socialist country trains and educates the new generation.¹⁹

What impressed Sun most was his observation that “women had the same rights as men to take part in building the socialist country” in post-Liberation China. Hence, Sun immediately reached a decision to turn to the form of the motion picture to “create artistic images” of women who were growing up in this new society and to fulfill the goal of propagating patriotism in China.²⁰

During his nineteen days on *The People 9*, Sun Yu met crew members with diverse personalities and backgrounds. Among them, Lin Youhua, a female third mate, left him with the most profound impression. Sun remembered Lin as a “frank and straightforward” young woman. Her short stature was contrasted with the tremendous enthusiasm and vigor she displayed in the workplace. This energetic and ambitious navigator typified China's first-generation female professionals and lent Sun inspiration for a new movie. Lin wound up becoming the prototype for

19. Sun Yu 孫瑜, “Jiangshang xing—chuangzuo *Chengfeng polang xia shenghuo sui*” 江上行—創作《乘風破浪》下生活隨記 [Travelling on the river—Random notes on experiencing the lives of (the ship's crew) to make *Brave the Wind and Waves*], *Dazhong dianying* 大眾電影 [Mass Film], no. 9 (1957): 26.

20. Sun “Jiangshang xing,” 26.

Conclusion

Both Louis Althusser and Slavoj Žižek address the “double meaning” of an individual’s subjectivity—a person as a “free agent, instigator of its activity” and as someone “subject to political rule.”¹ In Althusser’s words, “[t]here are no subjects except by and for their subjection.”² This “double meaning” manifests itself in what Alexei Yurchak calls the “Lefort Paradox” in the socialist context: “achieving the full liberation of the society and individual (building of communism, creation of the New Man) by means of subsuming that society and individual under full party control.”³ In this sense, the filmmakers’ quest for their subjectivities in post-1949 China and their subjection to the party-state in Mao-era China were implicated in each other in an irreducible way, as two sides of the same coin. In other words, their resistance to and accommodation with the party policies did not stem from their *a priori* identities as resisters or collaborators but resulted from the subjectivizing processes they underwent in the seventeen years before the Cultural Revolution.

In the post-Cultural Revolution period, memoirists and (auto)biographers tended to portray them as victims or even martyrs in Mao-era China. Such retrospectively constructed “facts,” which usually deviated from the lived experiences of those film directors, as I have argued, sprang from a collective action taken by the survivors of the Cultural Revolution from the late 1970s onward, to trenchantly criticize various CCP-led political movements. Such critiques were not only emotional but also dictated by the political environment of the day. For example, Zheng Junli’s wife, Huang Chen, publicly testified in a 1978 essay against Jiang Qing for the latter’s “appalling crime” of murdering Zheng and angrily called for severely punishing

1. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 229.

2. Louis Althusser, *Lenin & Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 183.

3. Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*, 11. The Lefort paradox is derived from Claude Lefort’s analysis of the contradiction of the rule in any given society: “The rule must be abstracted from any question concerning its origin; thus, it goes beyond the operations that it controls.” Meanwhile, the rule must also prove its validity through usage; it is constantly subject to the demonstration of its effectiveness, and is thus contradictorily represented as a convention.” Finally, the “authority of the master” could conceal the contradiction. See Claude Lefort, *The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1986), 212–13.

Jiang, her longtime friend.⁴ This essay, without a doubt, constituted a concerted effort to defame the Gang of Four and to hold its members accountable for all the tragedies that had occurred during the Cultural Revolution before the official trial of Jiang Qing proceeded. Thirty-five years later, a calmer and more sober Huang Chen began to portray the same Madam Mao in a very different fashion. In her memoir published in 2013, Huang, who finally achieved peace of mind, recalled the firm friendship of Jiang Qing, Zheng Junli, and Zhao Dan before and after 1949 and portrayed Madam Mao in a more positive light: a cheerful and amicable Jiang Qing in the 1950s as well as a gloomy and nervous Jiang Qing under unbearable political pressure on the eve of the Cultural Revolution.⁵ The marked contrast highlighted in Huang's memoir thus creates an impression that Jiang Qing herself was the victim of the precarious political climate in Mao-era China.

This autobiographer's shifted grounds over the three decades provide a reminder about the risk of uncritically accepting such accounts. They also raise questions regarding the legitimacy of memoirs and personal accounts as reliable sources in studying the lived experiences in Mao-era China. At a time when the entire society was eager to exorcise the foul influences of the Cultural Revolution and, by extension, the Mao Zedong era, narratives about the filmmakers' victimhood and martyrdom took on special political significance. It was under this circumstance that Zhao Dan was enshrined as a noble warrior against the CCP's control over China's film industry. In a similar fashion, the post-1949 film works of old-generation directors, such as Wu Yonggang and Sun Yu, slipped into oblivion as if they were entirely futile because of the party's oppression. Even Xie Jin, who managed to escape all political persecutions before the mid-1960s, downplayed the benefits he reaped during the first seventeen years of the PRC but became better known as a critic and exposé of the evils of the Cultural Revolution.

What this narrative misses is the other side of the story. Zheng Junli enjoyed an excellent reputation as a specialist in historical/biographical movies in the 1950s and 1960s because of, not despite, the party's censorship of the motion picture. More importantly, he became a self-conscious contributor to and promoter of party-endorsed historiography. Zhao Dan broke records for the speediness of shooting a film during the Great Leap Forward and thereby earned enormous political capital. This political capital was further translated into his success as a film superstar in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Likewise, Sun Yu was a propagandist of the Great-Leap speed by highlighting the accelerated promotion track of the protagonist in *Brave the Wind and Waves* from a trainee to the third mate within fifteen months. Wu Yonggang, who had never been involved in making any films related to China's traditional opera before 1949, established his fame internationally as a maestro of

4. Huang, "Kongsu 'Siren bang' dui Zheng Junli tongzhi ji qita dianying gongzuozhe de canku pohai," 203.

5. Huang and Zheng, *Wo he Junli*, 80–95.

opera film in the 1960s, prompting Hong Kong investors to expressly designate him in 1962 as the director of a new edition of *Marriage Between a Fairy and Man*.⁶

It is worth mentioning that Wu Yonggang's willingness to cooperate with the party authorities did not result from the political persecution he suffered in 1957 and beyond. As early as 1955, Wu produced *Hasen and Jiamila* (*Hasen yu Jiamila* 哈森與加米拉), a film featuring an all-Kazakh cast.⁷ The CCP's organ newspaper, *The People's Daily*, lauded this film for authentically representing the lives and struggles of Kazakh in northwestern China and publicizing the notion of "collectivism."⁸ In hindsight, *Hasen and Jiamila* was recognized for its contribution to instilling into the massive audience the CCP's policies on China's ethnic minorities.⁹ Finally, Xie Jin rose to prominence quickly not just because of his outstanding filmmaking abilities but also thanks to the CCP's hidden agenda to cultivate and promote young-generation film workers. An unintended consequence was the creation of Xie's unique, melodramatic directorial style, helping him spread his fame both at home and abroad.

It is tempting to define those directors' collaboration with the party as what Gleb Tsipursky calls "conformist agency"—"the conscious and willing decision, stemming primarily from one's internal motivations and desires, to act in ways that closely follow top-level guidelines."¹⁰ However, the notion of "conformist agency" still operates within the resistance-accommodation paradigm. Throughout this book, I have called for transcending this paradigm by placing emphasis on understanding those star directors as ordinary people with universal human needs: substantial pay, improved living conditions, more job opportunities, and higher political standing. Their career success under the new sociopolitical system, if possible, would certainly help to meet all those private needs. Therefore, it is vital to understand that those directors worked along the party lines—however ambivalent and ever-changing—to serve dual purposes: to exploit their position to pursue their personal interests¹¹ and to make contributions to propagating China's socialism on the screen.

6. Shanghai Municipal Archives, A22-1-614, 27.

7. Liu, *Moulding the Socialist Subject*, 77.

8. Zhang Yue 章越, "Kan gushi pian 'Hasen yu Jiamila'" 看故事片 "哈森與加米拉" [Watching the feature film, *Hasen and Jiamila*], *Renmin ribao* 人民日報 [People's Daily], August 2, 1955.

9. Li Miao 李淼, *Yunnan shaoshu minzu tici dianying yanjiu: bianjiang xiangxiang, minzu renting yu wenhua jiangou* 雲南少數民族題材電影研究：邊疆想像、民族認同與文化建構 [Studies on minorities films in Yunnan: The imagination of the frontier, ethnic identities, and cultural construction] (Kunming: Yunnan daxue chubanshe, 2016), 31.

10. Gleb Tsipursky, *Socialist Fun: Youth, Consumption, and State-Sponsored Popular Culture in the Soviet Union, 1945–1970* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016), 8.

11. Vladimir Shlapentokh calls this process "privatization" or even "destatization." He believes that the process of "privatization," in which individuals took advantage of the public services they were involved in to seek private profits, constituted the most important part of social development in all socialist regimes, China included. See Shlapentokh, *Public and Private Life of the Soviet People*, 154.

Their efforts to turn their public services into their private gains and their toeing the party line in their filmmaking activities were not mutually contradictory. Instead, the intertwining of the two constituted the very essence of those filmmakers' everyday lives in Mao-era China, and it is futile to disentangle the two. In the process of working under the new sociopolitical system in Mao-era China, the filmmakers' strenuous efforts to find new niches for their film careers (successfully or not), make private gains, and reconfirm their positions in the film circles served as their subjectivizing practices. As such, they were eager to write themselves into the new social and political order. To rephrase Althusser and Žižek, they developed their subjectivities by both taking the initiatives in their careers and subjecting them to the party-state. Their entanglement with the political authorities shaped their new identities. By resorting to their most essential and most skillful subjectivizing practice—filmmaking—the filmmakers tried their best to *work* the system to maximize the benefits and minimize the damages.

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