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电影下乡

Sending Films to the Countryside

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The idea of delivering education, health care, and technical knowledge to the countryside has always been an important part of China's nation-building effort. In the early twentieth century, many intellectuals argued that such initiatives would be crucial to the production of modern citizens in China's vast rural areas. They also maintained that the suffering and hardship that they had to endure in the process would be the key to converting themselves into new political subjects.¹ By the time of the Cultural Revolution, the idea of 'going down to the countryside' took on yet another significance, as it became associated with the relocation of millions of urban youths to the rural regions for reeducation by a supposedly ideologically pure peasantry. In spite of the strong resentment harboured by these so-called 'sent-down youths' (*xiafang qingnian*) or the 'Lost Generation,' the programme—which was officially called 'up to the mountains, down to the villages' (*shangshan xiaxiang*)—did help to address many of the deficiencies suffered by the rural communities.

Nevertheless, *xiaxiang* as a cultural and political trope encompassed a wide range of practices that served to reduce the unevenness between rural and urban areas and populations. Among them was the project known as *dianying xiaxiang*, or 'sending films to the countryside.' Like other projects that sought to overcome the rural and urban economic and social disparity, a primary purpose of bringing films to China's rural communities was to deliver entertainment to remote and underdeveloped areas. At the same time, not unlike similar mobile cinema projects around the world, open-air film screenings also allowed the Chinese rural population to experience the shock-and-awe of the cinematic spectacle for the first time. Moreover, the magic quality of outdoor films did not just disrupt the harsh reality of the everyday, but also projected the utopian fantasy of the socialist future. In doing so, the state effectively presented itself as the cultural broker of modernity, strengthening its legitimacy and authority.



In television footage from 1965, a female projectionist is seen singing a revolutionary song while her male colleague is showing a slideshow prior to a feature presentation. The same machine is also projecting the lyrics that she is holding in her left hand. (Inner Mongolia, c. 1965; Central Studio of News Reels Productio archival footage)

Mobile film screening was indeed tremendously popular in the socialist era. Since such screening events reached a village only once every few years, many villagers walked for hours and even days from nearby villages in order to catch a film. Projectionists, many of whom were young men and occasionally women—including a large number of sent-down youths during the Cultural Revolution—were well respected by rural residents as they were seen as intellectuals and agents of the state. Their jobs entailed the endurance of hardship as they needed to cross formidable mountains and rivers with heavy equipment in tow. Projectionists were also often required to do live performances, such as puppet shows and singing, as part of the practice of delivering revolutionary messages to the rural masses. Not surprisingly, by the late 1980s, mobile films sponsored by the government ceased to operate as the magic of outdoor propaganda films was increasingly challenged by other forms of popular entertainment, such as television, karaoke, and foreign films.

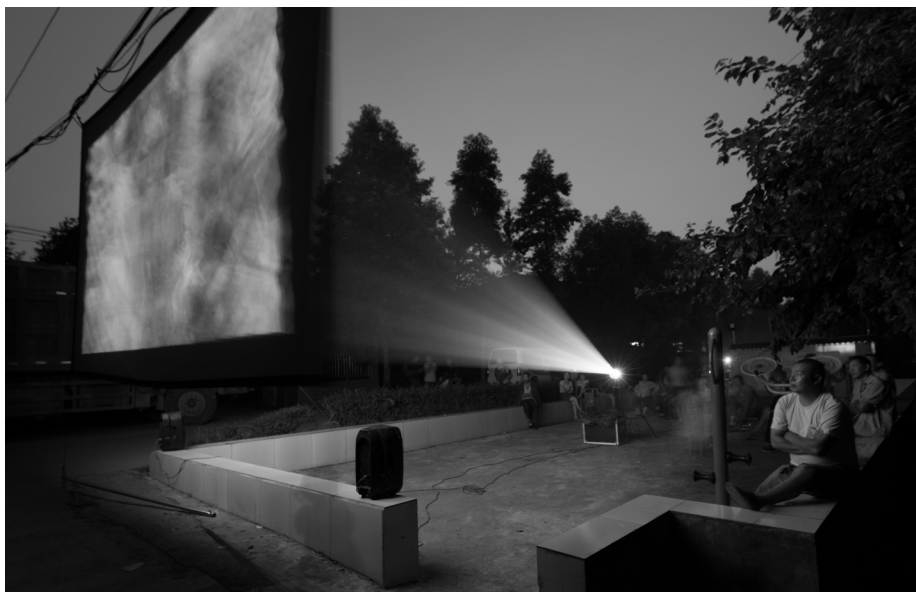
Yet, significantly, in 1998—an era of rising rural and urban disparity as well as social discontent—the Chinese government reactivated the programme of rural outdoor film screenings with much greater coverage and intensity, promising that it would deliver at least one film in each village every month. Known as Project 2131, the programme has shown how digital technology can be mobilised to augment the already powerful propaganda machine in the postsocialist era. At the same time, contemporary mobile film screenings also operate in a different visual economy and political register. Instead



A projectionist setting up the screen for the evening in a so-called Socialist New Village, which is often a combination of several old villages with villagers being housed in mid-rise and occasionally high-rise buildings. (Mumian new village, Sichuan province, 2013; Tong Lam)

of just screening the popular old revolutionary films, the mobile screening programme uses newly developed propaganda films that are specially made for the rural audience. With the assumption that the rural viewers are simple-minded and unsophisticated, these are mostly war and revolutionary films set in the World War II and Civil War times. While these new films, like their predecessors, tell the familiar stories of the liberation of the peasantry under the leadership of the Communist Party, their emphasis is more often about the triumph of the Party and the nation rather than class struggle. Moreover, the sheer quantity of these films is enormous, as an entire segment of the Chinese film industry is now devoted to their production and digital delivery for the government-sponsored rural mobile cinema.

Of course, the Chinese countryside today is different from that of the socialist era in some fundamental ways. Decades of rapid urbanisation have not merely transformed China into an urban nation, but have also uprooted many of its rural citizens. In most villages, those who are being left behind are the elderly and their grandchildren, since young and middle-aged men and women have often become migrant workers in the city. If these peasant migrant workers, who mostly work in factories, construction sites, and other service industries, have become precarious labourers in the postsocialist economy, so are the new generation of projectionists. The improvement of technology and infrastructure means that film projection has become straightforward, effortless, and a highly disciplined affair. Projectionists can now drive directly to the screening site with their government-issued vehicle and digital equipment. From the downloading of films to the uploading of audience tallies, screening events are constantly being tracked



An anti-Japanese war film is being screened next to a village road. Aside from a few classic films, most of the films used in the new mobile cinema programme are tailor-made for such purposes. (Yuhe village, Sichuan province, 2014; Tong Lam)

and tabulated. Gone, therefore, are the days when delivering films to the countryside was seen as admirable and heroic. In fact, these days, projectionists are generally poorly paid, part-time and subcontract workers with few benefits.

More importantly, the new generation of propaganda films are no longer about celebrating and sustaining the socialist revolution. Quite the contrary, they are now used to promote patriotism in order to ease any potential social discontent amid the country's enduring, if not widening, urban and rural divide. In this respect, it seems that the latest 'sending films to the countryside' programme is nothing but an ironic reminder of its phantom past. Meanwhile, in the new visual economy, as flashy skyscrapers and mobile devices have become ubiquitous, these open-air propaganda films, even with their updated audiovisual effects, can hardly offer the same level of enchantment and satisfaction that they once did. Behind the sound and fury generated by special effects are the unresolved tensions between the socialist ideal and the postsocialist reality. Hence, if some viewers nonetheless find these films captivating, it is not because of the projected future imagined by these films, but the nostalgic feelings evoked by them.

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