



Social Education and Economic Plight: War-Time Mobile Screenings in the Resistance Base and the Great Rear Area in China During 1937–1945

Lei Fang^(✉)

Coventry University, Coventry, UK
tomhans882@outlook.com

Abstract. Mobile Screening as a typical watching and screening form is always neglected by mainstream film history. Some scholars affirm that it is a tool of political propaganda. This essay looks at mobile screenings in two areas, the Resistance Base and the Great Rear Area in China during wartime (from 1937 to 1945). It demonstrates specific screening activities and the audience’s receptions under the intertwined political discourses. On the one hand, mobile screening as a prime social education was used by two forces to accomplish their political purposes. On the other hand, political forces adopted different attitudes to mobile screening in economic plight. This article explores the interaction between political discourses and mobile screening in China during wartime by examining screened movies, watching experiences from the audience, film reviews, and a memoir.

Keywords: Mobile screening · Social education · Political discourses · Propaganda

1 Introduction

In vast swathes of countryside in China back in the 1920s, mobile screening was probably the only watching form for many local villagers to embrace this newly invented modern technology. Compared with theatres in the urban area, since its inception, mobile screening has been entitled to an apparatus of the authorities, which constantly propagandizes and civilizes the masses and governs rural society. Hence, in previous narration on film history, it was commonly excluded from the mainstream. Most mobile movies are not taken as entertainment or art, other than merely a “useful” tool.

This essay will mainly discuss the relationship between political discourses and mobile screening. When the Republic of China was involved in the total war against Japan in 1937, mobile screening had been widely promoted and practiced with the rise and expansion of different political forces. In the same period, two ruling political forces, the Communist Party of China (CPC) and the Nationalist Party (NP), organized film projection units screening movies in the areas they occupied, the Resistance Base and the Great Rear Area.

Mobile screening might be a good entry point to associate with the discussion on politics, society, history, and concepts back in the age of war. More importantly, the research on mobile screening might complement mainstream film history so that from an alternative perspective, it can give a new answer to the question, what is cinema?

2 Literature Review

Previous research on wartime mobile screenings concentrates on historical evidence and its theoretical and conceptional analysis. ‘Chinese Film’s Monument: Stories of Yan’an Film Group’ is a memoir that collects official historical evidence and provides the perspective of the mainstream narrative on mobile screening activities. ‘National Gazette’ movie supplements started publishing in 1938, in which many articles provide rich historical details and stories about the moving picture section subordinated to NP’s Political Department. It, therefore, offers a prime perspective from the NP-controlled Great Rear Area.

Some scholars have defined mobile screening in wartime. Li Daoxin (2006) cites Althusser’s idea that ideology always interpellates individuals as ‘subject’ to comply with ‘SUBJECT’. He affirms that mobile screening is an operational process of ideological apparatus [1]. Liu Sijia (2019) classifies mobile screening into three primary forms. One is ‘open-air screening’, a commercial and entertaining screening along with the advent of early movies. Another primary function of mobile screening is to educate the masses with knowledge. It is also highly ideological and political screening activities extensively practiced and developed during wartime [2].

3 A Brief Introduction to Mobile Screenings in the Resistance Base and the Great Rear Area

Mobile screenings in the Resistance Base started in the autumn of 1939 [3]. Yan’an film projection unit was in charge of most relative works. The unit was affiliated with the General Political Department of the Eighth Route Army, and its members were drafted from political work posts in the Army [4]. Political propaganda was the principal work for the unit. Besides implementing superiors’ orders to screen in some conferences and activities, the unit also screened movies in the countryside of the Shaan-Gan-Ning Border Region and military camps [5]. Most movies the unit screened were USSR movies, which were brought back with film projectors and other equipment from the Soviet Union [6].

In December 1938, the moving picture section affiliated with the Political Department of Military Affairs Commission (an NP’s military sector) was established. And then, it settled in Chong Qing, the most important city in the Great Rear Area, and started showing residents and soldiers movies [3]. Under the influence of NP’s state-owned film policy, some film companies, such as “Zhongdian” (The Central Motion Picture Studio) and “Zhongzhi” (The China Motion Picture Corporation), were active during wartime. They not only screened many Chinese movies but produced numerous newsreels [7]. In the meantime, educational movie companies attached to NP’s CC clique still carried on their screening scheme, which attempted to popularize scientific knowledge and common sense of life to citizens.

4 Mobile Screening as a Prime Social Education

Unlike meritocracy and national education, social education is more significant during wartime because the purpose of that is to serve as many as the masses. As a new technology, mobile movies, which can more directly and vividly represent the contents of social education, have gradually become a crucial weapon. However, specific mobile screening practices reveal different emphasis and forms. It might be due to the discrepancy between political and educational concepts in the Resistance Base and the Great Rear Area.

4.1 Mobile Screenings in the Resistance Base Under Marxian Class Theory

Gao Hua (2010) points out that in the Resistance Base in wartime, the educational policy of the USSR, Marxian class theory still takes up the principal position [8]. Most of the USSR movies the unit screened shaped heroic images and explicit class awareness. No matter what social status those heroes are at, they do not doubt to stand with the proletariats and speak for them. For example, *Movie Chapayev* (1934), the protagonist Vasily Chapayev and his division commissar partner Furmanov represent the characteristics of peasants and intellectuals. Their harmonious relationship is the epitome of a successful combination of two classes. Even though some plots related to class struggle may empathize with the Chinese proletarian audience, USSR movies are generally out of place in war-torn China and poor people in struggle. From the perspective of the audience, cultural barriers still exist.

The unit's screening strategy was also quite different from the traditional way in theatres. The former captain of the film project unit Xi Zhen recalls,

“Before the screening, we would report recent news, tasks, and CPC's policies. We also showcased some individual cases which were active and outstanding in production and revolutionary struggle. Then we would exhibit photos of Party's leaders, including Chairman Mao, Liu Shaoqi....”

Marxian class theory on education always complies with the demand of revolutionary ideology, in which political education and political mobilization dominate other activities [9]. “Individual cases in production and revolutionary struggle”, as Xi refers to, not only create heroic models like what USSR propaganda movies get used to but inspire and mobilize more people to engage in movements led by the Party. Mobile screening here is highly political, ideological, and somewhat abstract. When it merely confronted the masses, other than party members, propaganda around the Party seemed unusual. Unlike other practices of social education in the Resistance Base in the same period, such as increasing literacy rate and prohibiting foot-binding, mobile screening under Marxian class theory lacks the practical and seems dogmatic.

4.2 The Propaganda of Nationality in Mobile Screenings in the Great Rear Area

The Great Rear Area's educational concept completely differs from Marxian class theory in the Resistance Base. “Kangzhanjiguoguo” (Resistance against Japan aggression and national construction) as the supreme principle guides every aspect of social education there. It sheds more light on nationality and attempts to call on the masses to resist the

Japanese invasion and construct a national state. To accomplish the aim, most screened mobile movies were with straight storytelling and mechanic preaching [10]. ‘National Gazette’ movie supplements once recorded the screening situation while the audience watched the movie *800 heroes* (1938).

When heroes in the Sihang warehouse Zhabei district fight with enemies, they get excited. When they see enemy soldiers fleeing under fire, they yell, “chase them, fuck! ... every tight moment, we always hear “fuck!” from the audience, which sound is much louder than the soundtrack from the movie... enemy’s cruel bombing, broken walls, brutal ferocity, rape, and loot all excite the audience...their hatred goes deep, and they believe China will win in the end. (‘National Gazette’ movie supplements).

There are many similar patriotic movies as if *800 heroes* (1938) in the Great Rear Area’s mobile screening. They largely adopt a similar narrative mode, “fight and sacrifice from Chinese soldiers, inhumanity, and brutality from Japanese invaders,” to muster up the audience’s courage and shape their national identity. The audience was always full of emotion and sentiment during the screening.

For the screening strategy, Mei Lin (2010) observes that before the movie screening, it would carry out political propaganda in which the image of the country’s leader would also appear in the screening for people’s worship [11].

“As the national leader appears on screen, there breaks out applause from the audience. Whether Lamas or ordinary people, they all feel inspired and pleasant. What they do shows the sincerity of supporting the leader. In every corner and nook in the motherland, compatriots all support the leader.” (‘National Gazette’ movie supplements).

The similarity of screenings in the two areas is that both propagandize and exhibit images of leaders. In the Great Rear Area context, national consciousness might be much more substantial. Here the leader is the nation’s leader rather than a party’s leader. “Whether Lamas or ordinary people” shows the inclusive attitude of the ‘Chinese nation’. For the propaganda of the NP, it is an indirect description and latent allusion. It probably conveys a concept of dictatorship in which one leader has been juxtaposed with one country and one party. Unlike the screening strategy in the Resistance Base, here made a veiled reference to politics.

4.3 The Screening of *Nanniwan* (1942) and “Combined Production with Labor” in the Resistance Base

Localization and pragmatism also became the trend of social education in the Resistance Base. Even if the USSR’s educational policy constantly impacted the development of education and culture since 1927, it generated a changing and alternative penchant, which can combine with China’s politics and economy better. Gao Hua (2010) points out that social education of the time was virtually in a transition period, from communist to new-democratic education [8]. Reflected in mobile movies, a screened documentary called *Nanniwan* (1942) may be an excellent example of the transition period.

And then they start doing the challenging works, cutting down the branch, setting up the tent, and digging the oven...they immediately dig the cave, and the cave becomes a beautiful room... rice fields cover the hill and many vegetables and crops...people start harvesting. They wear pure white shirts, put on straw hats cutting the paddy, and never

raise their heads. (Nanniwan on the Screen published in Xinhua Daily Paper, Chongqing, in February 1944).

The above is a scene description of *Nanniwan* (1942) from an audience. It depicts many laboring and producing scenes. “Combined production with labor” is the core content of the new-democratic education of the time, highlighting labor’s effect and value [8]. As the description mentions, a beautiful room and joyful harvest eventually become the meaning of labor. More significantly, what this movie represents is deeply linked with the land and people’s life experience. It can appeal intensely to the proletarian audience, peasants in particular. Compared with culturally distant and strange USSR movies and those patriotic movies in extreme war conditions, this kind of strength from realism is close to life and more likely to move the audience in their surroundings.

In the screening of the movie, not only are people as the audience in the Shaan-Gan-Ning Border Region watching a familiar story, but they are actual participants in the movie. It should not be easily recognized as propaganda merely for advocating some ideas and mobilizing people to labor or to produce. When the influencer and the audience know the purposes of each other, the propaganda is more likely a persuasion, which virtually rationalizes and ritualizes participants’ deeds in the name of collective consciousness.

4.4 Educational Movie Screenings in the Great Rear Area

Educational movie screenings also exist and get underway during wartime. Those movies adhere to the concept of the “Xin shenghuo yundong” (New Life Movement), which takes Chinese traditional culture’s “sense of propriety, justice, honesty and honor” as the guiding ideology to perform national management of the body and spirit of citizens [5]. For instance, the governor of Jiangsu province Chen Guofu wrote a movie called *Water and Sanitation* (1934). It attempts to educate people about breaking the bad habit of drinking water by popularizing and imparting scientific knowledge. Although it is an educational movie, it narratively adopts a mode of suspense piece, which constructs cliff-hanging scenes to a large degree. Compared with mobile screenings in the Resistance Base, educational movies are not mighty and lack political concern. However, they show some characteristics of modern education, more or less. The scientific and public consciousness they represent should be concerned.

For the screening strategy, because most educational movies were shot on 16 mm film, the format limits the number of mobile screenings [12]. They were shown in schools and some sporadic screenings in the countryside, so they were much less prevalent than patriotic movies in the Great Rear Area.

5 Mobile Screening: Struggle in Economic Plight

Although political forces endorsed mobile screenings and provided significant investment, the market still affected their states of operation. On the one hand, fewer new movies were produced and released due to the war. On the other hand, production and distribution budgets were cut because of less profit. The whole movie industry entered a vicious circle. Struggle in economic plight was a common situation for mobile screening during wartime.

5.1 A Commercial Screening Attempt in the Resistance Base

Because of various internal and external reasons, there was the most challenging time in the 1940s, a dramatic economic decline in the Resistance Base. An unprecedented food supply shortage occurred, even the severest famine in the past decade [13]. To overturn the situation, CPC implemented a large-scale production campaign. It developed some producing activities such as reclaiming wasteland, spinning, and running a commercial business. Yan'an film group and its subordinate film projection unit also engaged in the campaign and organized some self-rescuing commercial activities. In an interview, Zhai Chao, a former film worker in the group, said, "At the time, Chairman Mao encouraged us to self-rescue. What could the film group do? We made badges and medals using used films and chairman Mao's photos. Wu Yinxian opened a photo studio, and Lu Ming became the accountant. We also screened movies and sold the tickets. In the south of Yan'an city, there were two temples. We went there to screen from time to time, and mostly they were USSR movies." The book 'Chinese Film's Monument' provides more details, which can help us understand how the film group and the unit regard commercial screenings and relative activities.

More than ten thousand young people come from different cities to engage in the revolution in Yan'an. They love movies and have allowances from previous lives. Hence, some young people cannot curb their desires and consume money on movies. Before that, whether in Yan'an or the Shaan-Gan-Ning Border Region, all mobile movies are free. We are concerned about the demand for young people, so we decided to sell the tickets like it usually does in the commercial community. ('Chinese Film's Monument: Stories of Yan'an Film Group').

When mobile screening confronts the masses in the countryside, it is a tool of propaganda and education. However, as young people with allowances want to see movies, mobile screening incarnates their desires and consumption. How do the same USSR propaganda movies and mobile screenings bring out utterly different understanding? Strong class consciousness in mobile screening exists, solid contempt and criticism for intellectuals and bourgeoisie, and praise and concern for peasants and proletariat. Young intellectuals and the bourgeoisie who consume mobile movies might have accepted this class consciousness. It is a process of "Si xiang gaizao" (thought reform). Young people are eager to unite with the proletariat and attempt to abandon their original identity. Mobile movies here become revolutionary products, which those young people can consume to fulfil their eagerness to be the proletariat. It is as if indulgences in the Middle Ages. Although there are exchanges of commodities, they are not commercial acts. On the contrary, it should be seen as an act of revolution and faith.

What the film group and the projection unit did was pragmatical, even if politically, it was contrary to the principle of mobile screening as a tool of propaganda and education. In demanding and cruel wartime, survival might be the most important thing to be concerned. The CPC once considered abolishing the film group under the policy of downsizing [6]. It finally retained as it promised never to ask for expenditure from the superior. Depending on pragmatical commercial screening and other relative activities, the film group overcame the economic plight.

"Through these producing activities, the film group even can dispense allowances to everyone from time to time and never asks for expenditure from the government. It

not only solves members' problem of living costs but carves out a new way of getting money." ('Chinese Film's Monument: Stories of Yan'an Film Group').

5.2 The Dilemma of Mobile Screening in the Great Rear Area

However, in the Great Rear Area, the economic plight lies in the contradiction between profit movies and unconditional and non-profit propaganda and education. Under the influence of NP's state-owned film policy, the movie industry could not be market-oriented as it was in Shanghai before the war. The investment and the return could not create positive interaction. Regarding mobile screening, it relied entirely on investment and allocation from the government. Specifically, the state-owned film company, "Zhongzhi" (The China Motion Picture Corporation), developed well depending on its relationship with the military. Every movie averaged 280,000 viewers, and copies could be sold overseas [7]. Another state-owned film company "Zhongdian" (The Central Motion Picture Studio) developed not healthy. In 1939 its expenditure was less than 200,000 yuan, which was merely the half input of private company Mingxing before the war [7]. Considering the inflation during wartime, it shrank even further. When the economic plight came, the performance of the movie industry in the Great Rear Area was quite different from the pragmatical Yan'an film group. There still had the incredulous voice to question profit movies, "Please do not estimate movies with if they are profitable. We must consider the resistance's future and shift our profit concern to the meaning of the masses' resistance. We need unconditional screening [14]".

It can see that the movie industry and mobile screening in the Great Rear Area seems inflexible. Some people probably hold a binary view to deliberately create the contradiction between patriotic screening and commercial profit. It might be stranded in a new predicament that profit patriotic movies make money from disaster. Compared with class consciousness embedded deeply in mobile screening in the Resistance Base, nationality might be excessively concerned, which has become an exclusive dominant discourse.

6 Conclusion

This essay goes into wartime mobile screenings led by the CPC and the NP around two topics, social education and economic plight. Both political forces frequently used mobile screening as a social education tool during wartime. Specifically, mobile screening was affected by Marxian class theory and served the masses via USSR movies in the Resistance Base. However, some local and pragmatical screening activities were also developed in the Base during the same period. In the NP-controlled Rear Area, Nationality is the main content of social education. NP's moving picture section attempted to awaken the national identity of all citizens, and educational movies imparted scientific knowledge and common sense to the masses through small-scale mobile screenings.

Comparing mobile movies and screening strategies in the Base and the Great Rear Area, it can be explicitly seen that mobile screening activities in the Base are much more ideological and political than in the Rear Area. Mass screening even involved CPC's knowledge learning.

Regarding economic plight, the discussion shows that CPC's film group adopted a self-rescuing way to overcome a hard time, but NP's film companies merely relied on salvation from the government. Their attitudes toward mobile screening are also opposite.

Generally speaking, this essay merely focuses on two political forces in wartime, and the depth and width of this discussion are minimal. In fact, in the same period, more political forces had developed mobile screening activities in China, such as South Manchuria Railway Co. (endorsed by the Japanese government). Today, historical evidence of mobile screening has been digging out more and more. It is time to work on these fresh and various contents to broaden this essay's scope.

References

1. Li, D. X. (2006). Political Economy of Open-air Cinema. *Contemporary Cinema* 2006, (03), 97-101.
2. Liu, S. J. (2019). The Development and Evolution of Open-air cinema in the Republic of China. *Movie Literature* (722), 42-45.
3. Chen, H. W. (2009). Special Disseminator: Brief Introduction on Chinese Film Projection Units. *Fujian Forum* 2009, (6), 80-81
4. Wang, X. K., & Jiang, H. L. (1999). *Shaanxi Cinema Chronicle*. Xian: Culture Department of Shaanxi.
5. Qin, Y., & Zhang, D. (2022). War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression Project Volume 7. Education and Culture in Wartime: Cinema and Resistance. Nanjing: Jiangsu People's Publishing House.
6. Wu, Z. Q., & Zhang, D. (Eds.). (2008). *Chinese Film's Monument: Stories of Yan'an Film Group*. Beijing: Renmin University Press.
7. Wang, C. G. (2008). State-run-Educationalization-Popularization—Developing Trend and Turn of Rear Area Cinema. In Yang, T. S., & Fu, G. Y. (Eds.), *International Joint Study on Sino-Japan War Volume 2. Society·Culture·Region* (pp 0486-0504). Social Sciences Academic Press (China).
8. Gao, H. (2010). Political Mobilization and Social Reform of Revolutionary Populism: The Education in Communist-Controlled China. In Yang, T. S., & Fu, G. Y. (Eds.), *International Joint Study on Sino-Japan War Volume 2. Society·Culture·Region* (pp 3085-0402). Social Sciences Academic Press (China).
9. Gao, H. (1999). The value and meanings of Yan'an Education. *Jiangsu Social Sciences* 1999, (06), 120-126.
10. Shi, D. S. (1941). Chinese Cinema since the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression. In Wang, W. et al. (Eds.), *Chongqing Cinema during the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression* (pp 420-427). Chongqing Publishing Group.
11. Mei, L. (2010). The Research on Chongqing 'National Gazette' Movie Supplements. Master's thesis, Southwest University, Chongqing.
12. An, Y. (2008). Absent Presence: Kuomintang's Educational Movies in the Rear Area. *Journal of Guizhou Minzu University* 2008, (05), 116-119.
13. Feng, S. B. (2001). The Research on Disasters and Famines of the Shanxi-Gansu-Ningxia border region. Master's thesis, Central China Normal University, Wuhan.
14. Xiao, L. Some Opinions on Newsreels in Wartime. In Yan, Z. (Eds.), *The Chronicle of Chongqing Cinema* (p 12). Chongqing Cinema Distribution and Screening Company.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

