Still from *Lenin in 1918*.

Aesthetics of Socialist Internationalism

Lenin Films in the People's
Republic of China

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While Soviet fiction and documentary films featuring Vladimir Lenin circulated in the People's Republic China throughout the Maoist period, the meaning of Lenin as revolutionary symbol was not fixed. This essay examines the changing meaning of Lenin films before and after the Sino-Soviet split as a means to historicise the post-socialist afterlives of this particular movie genre. This allows us to see the historic specificity and contingency of aesthetic frames conjoining legitimating ideology and political potentiality.

In the twenty-first century, Lenin's image in cinema exists as floating textual references to a Maoist collective memory that is sutured to a post-revolutionary existence governed by the Chinese Communist Party. Scholars including Geremie Barmé (2009), Guobin Yang (2003), Ming-bao Yue (2005), and others have identified the ways in which appropriation of revolutionary culture for a nostalgia industry forecloses revolutionary political imagination. Yet, if we move back in time to consider how and why Lenin films assumed a central role in Chinese Communist Party's aesthetic legitimization, we also return

to debates over socialist theory and praxis, and the paradox of working toward liberation of ‘all slaves of the world’ and unquestioning loyalty to communist parties. The move to historicise filmic scenes that are currently enshrouded in nostalgia allows us to see the historic specificity and contingency of aesthetic frames conjoining legitimating ideology and political potentiality.

Situating Lenin Films

In 1951, in commemoration of the 27th anniversary of the death of Vladimir Lenin, the China-Soviet Friendship Society in Beijing offered a lecture by a Soviet education specialist followed by a screening of the 1937 film *Lenin in October* (People’s Daily 1951). Over 20 years later, in recognition of the 56th anniversary of ‘the great socialist October Revolution’, the same committee once again screened *Lenin in October*, this time alongside a Chinese news documentary entitled *Today’s China* (Xinhua 1973). The 22 years separating these screenings saw numerous other public presentations throughout China of this well-known film, as well as other Lenin films including *Lenin in 1918* (1939), *Lenin in Poland* (1966), and *Vladimir Ilyich Lenin* (1949). Despite the continuous presence of specific Soviet films in China from the 1950s to the 1970s, Sino-Soviet cooperation in the political, economic, technological, and cultural realms peaked in 1954–55. This was then followed by a prolonged period of decline. Within this changing context, the very meaning and geography of the international proletarian revolution was at stake.

In the Chinese case, Lenin became part of two legitimating triumvirates: the ideological grouping of Marx, Lenin, and Mao Zedong, and the grouping of revolutionary state leaders composed of Lenin, Stalin, and Mao Zedong. The meaning of Lenin as revolutionary symbol was not fixed in either formulation. One constant feature existed, however: the authority of Mao Zedong as revolutionary theorist as well as state leader depended upon successful

mobilisation of Lenin symbolism to support varied contemporary political, ideological, social, and aesthetic programmes. The importance of such transnational revolutionary iconography in the Chinese revolution arose out of a dialectical conceptualisation of revolutionary and national identity in China. To extend Emma Widdis’ (2003) insights into the forging of Soviet space and Sovietness through film, we can understand Lenin films as establishing an aesthetic relationship between Soviet and Chinese people and state, and the physical worlds they inhabited.

Soviet film captured the staging and effect of monumental mass spectacles of the late 1920s in the Soviet Union, and thereby made it available for export. With respect to the mass spectacle staged in Leningrad in 1927, *Ten Years*, Katerina Clark (1995, 247–48) observes:

In the new mass spectacle, it is Lenin who makes the Revolution – or the Revolution *is* Lenin. ... Lenin is not a mere historical actor, but of a totally different order of humanity than that of ordinary citizens. Consequently, it is really only Lenin who can go back into history (or forward). He is both extrahistorical and a maker of history, and so he represents something like the Aristotelian category of the God.

As film and other cultural representations of Lenin in the October Revolution depicted him in command of space and time, this both grounded Lenin in a particular historical moment and loosened him from the moment.

The framing of *Lenin in 1918* and *Lenin in October* as aesthetic consolidation of Lenin, Stalin, and Mao as revolutionary state leaders was most pronounced from 1950 through 1954. A 1952 article in the *People’s Daily* entitled ‘Epics of Socialist Revolution and Construction’ commenced by referring to the 82nd anniversary of Lenin’s birth and the screening of the films *Lenin in October*, *Lenin in 1918*, and *The Vow* (1946, dubbed and imported in China in 1950) (Tang 1952). Tang Jie, the author of the article, affirmed in the second sentence that the power

of these films came from the strong influence of the exalted leadership of Lenin and Stalin in bringing about socialist revolution. Tang provided a lengthy description of the scenes in *The Vow* surrounding the death of Lenin, including melodramatic reminders that Lenin cannot die because he lives within our hearts. The direct beneficiary of the immortal spirit of Lenin in this tale of revolutionary succession was, of course, Stalin.

Yet we must also consider that scenes such as Stalin's oath to Lenin in the Red Square resonated with Chinese viewers because they were intimately familiar with a similar staged scene of immense importance to the Chinese nation: Mao Zedong's proclamation of the founding of the People's Republic of China on 1 October 1949. These two scenes appeared in China as both synchronic historical moments, experienced and consumed at the same time, and as moments with chronological order.

As a way of seeing and understanding the world, the didactic discourse around Lenin films participated in producing a global dialectic with attendant multiple synchronic and diachronic spatio-temporal linkages. Mao's global vision of continuous revolution as well as his own legitimacy as a socialist ruler depended upon mutual recognition with Stalin of the intertwined struggles of the Soviet Union and China. Within this context, the cults of Stalin and Lenin functioned in China in the early 1950s as recognition of the international context of China's past, present, and future. Debates aside over whether or not (and to what extent) Mao considered himself the successor to Stalin for leadership in the unfolding history of socialism, the active cultivation of Soviet cults of personality in China produced an experience of China as global historical actor whose fate was an inherent part of Lenin's October Revolution and Stalin's consolidation of a socialist state in the Soviet Union. It was in this context that Soviet films about Lenin and Stalin were viewed, debated, and disseminated in the People's Republic of China (PRC) in the early 1950s.

Lenin after Stalin

The death of Stalin provided an opportunity for—and eventually necessitated—a gradual disengagement of Lenin from Stalin in the state-authored conceptualisations of Soviet film and Sino-Soviet relations more broadly. As early as January 1953, Lenin occasionally stood alone, or at least more loosely connected to Stalin. This alternative framing of the relevance of films such as *Lenin in October* and *Lenin in 1918* to the Chinese context appeared most markedly in instances where screenings of these films were associated with discussions of the international framework of revolution. One article that appeared in the *People's Daily* in 1953 marked the 29th anniversary of Lenin's death by covering commemorative activities in Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, and the German Democratic Republic (GDR) (Xinhua 1953). The first half of the article was characteristic of the conflation of Lenin and Stalin, as it utilised a hyphenated Lenin-Stalin phrasing on a couple of occasions. Contrary to the format of most articles on Lenin and Lenin films during the early 1950s that moved through a predictable line of leaders from Lenin, to Lenin-Stalin, to Stalin, to Mao Zedong, however, the conclusion of this article moved away from a Lenin-Stalin coupling. The final few paragraphs included short descriptions of events in Romania, the GDR, and Czechoslovakia but no mention was made of Stalin. The article concluded simply by remarking that in Czechoslovakia screenings of *Lenin in October* and *Lenin in 1918*, as well as other Soviet films, took place. Similar forms of reporting on international commemoration of Lenin appeared one year later. In coverage of events in Moscow, Leningrad, Korea, Poland, Bulgaria, Hungary, Albania, and the GDR, the only use of 'Lenin-Stalin' occurred in reference to Korea (Xinhua 1954).

The shift here was subtle but significant. The disarticulation of Lenin-Stalin at the end of the articles suggested that Stalin was not the champion of socialist internationalism

in all instances. The alternative framing of Lenin films offered thus provided space for contesting Stalinist and/or Soviet anti-imperialism by suggesting Mao and China as legitimate successors to the October Revolution. The deterioration of Sino-Soviet relations during the period of Khrushchev's rule in the USSR following the death of Stalin in 1953 was an important moment of contestation over revolutionary meaning, authority, and identity. In these confrontations, Lenin films played a central role. These films continued to be screened on a regular basis but were now framed differently. This entailed placing a greater emphasis on Lenin over Stalin so as to forge a popular revolutionary understanding based on connections between the thought of Lenin and the thought of Mao Zedong, and to assert the authenticity of Chinese rather than Soviet-authored anti-imperialism and socialist internationalism.

Newspaper articles and broadly-circulated propaganda materials of the period endorsed particular Maoist initiatives by linking them to the person and thought of Lenin. For example, discussions of the desirability of friendly competition between organisational units highlighted Lenin's writings on the subject (Liu 1954). This privileging of the writings of Lenin worked to remove Stalin from an ideological lineage tying Lenin to Mao Zedong through promotion of revolutionary enthusiasm and populist forces. The promotion of Leninist ideology, thus had a new use in China—to challenge rather than shore up the cult of Stalin and to position Mao as primary contemporary agent for the unfolding of international proletarian revolution.

The move to disentangle Lenin from Stalin took place in an understated yet effective manner, emphasising revolutionary theory over state leadership. The relatively brief but front-page 1956 commemoration of 86th anniversary of Lenin's birthday in the *People's Daily* remained noticeably silent on any connection between Lenin and Stalin. It also lacked praise for Lenin as a great individual. Instead, the text referred to Leninism (列宁思想), singling out a speech

delivered at the China-Soviet Friendship Society (CSFS). The speech credited Leninism with providing leadership for international events, national economic development, and Party leadership. Following this talk, audience members watched *Lenin in October*. The second and final paragraph of the article reported that CSFS also hosted a photograph exhibition and that the first volume of Lenin's collected works as well as collection of other writings by Lenin had recently been published in Beijing. To commemorate Lenin now meant to become versed in Lenin's Thought. This created a new context in which Lenin films circulated and in which Chinese audiences viewed and understood the films.

Unlike in the Soviet Union, in China the dismantling of the Lenin-Stalin coupling did not entail the literal erasure of Stalin from the revolutionary picture. The PRC did not pick up the de-Stalinised version of *Lenin in 1918* that blocked out Stalin in his first scene with Lenin. Rather, the PRC continued to screen Stalinist-era films, many of which were banned in the Soviet Union under Khrushchev, with a marked preference for early Stalinist films that championed utopian views of socialism. According to various reports and exchanges filed with Sovexportfilm in the late 1950s, the most popular Soviet films at this time were war films, adventure films, and comedies as well as those featuring the revolutionary movement and revolutionary figures. In Heilongjiang province, of the 2,011 screenings of Soviet films to an audience of 1,048,731, the best films from the perspective of the audience were *Tales about Lenin* (1957) and the animated film *Snow Queen* (1957).

Lenin Films in China in the 1960s

Alongside other anti-colonial movements, the May Fourth movement in China viewed the October Revolution as the emancipatory beginnings of a radical reconfiguration of

the world. This reconfiguration was, as Gyan Prakash (1996, 196–97) noted, ultimately utopian as it took colonial domination as the basis for postcolonial transformation. As it developed, the anti-colonial imaginary did not always map onto Soviet cartography. Soviet actions in 1956 in Eastern Europe facilitated the production of a new revolutionary geography. The large-scale use of force in Hungary meant that Asian countries publicly drew parallels between the English-French-Israeli aggression in Egypt and Soviet troops in Hungary (Kramer 1998, 212). The framing of anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism as antithetical to Khrushchev's Soviet Union, allowed China to loosen Lenin and socialist revolution from its Soviet roots by championing the praxis of socialist internationalism and class struggle. Films about Lenin circulating in the PRC became part of re-centering socialist revolution around China by displacing Khrushchev.

In 1960, General Secretary of the Shanghai branch of CSFS Bai Yan believed that the most popular of the ten Soviet films shown on the occasion of the 43rd anniversary of the October Revolution were Lenin films (State Archives of the Russian Federation). By the end of the decade, and during the period of the Cultural Revolution in China, Lenin films appeared as the sole survivors of the political purging of the film repertoire. In Beijing in 1965 there were more than 6,000 screenings of Soviet films, but in 1966 Soviet films were exhibited only 300 times. Strikingly, only six Soviet films were available for shows in Beijing at this time. These films were: *Lenin in October*, *Lenin in 1918* and other unnamed 'old films' (Russian State Archives of Literature and Arts). The films sent to China in 1968 included more Lenin films, namely the fiction film *A Mother's Devotion* (1967) as well as a 1968 documentary on the Soviet army and a fiction feature about a revolutionary, *Nikolai Bauman* (1967).

The renewed relative popularity of Lenin films meant that by the late 1960s Soviet film in China could largely be equated with Lenin films. At this moment, a cautious reintroduction of the Lenin-Stalin pairing occurred in short

articles reporting screenings of *Lenin in October* and *Lenin in 1918* for various anniversary celebrations. In 1967 and future references, Stalin received credit alongside Lenin for his leadership of the revolutionary movement and anti-imperialist struggle. The praise for Lenin and 'his successor, Stalin', functioned to highlight the primary role played by Lenin in the revolutionary struggle (Xinhua 1967). The naming of Stalin as successor in this instance rendered him secondary to Lenin, rather than a larger than life living embodiment of Lenin as was the case in the early 1950s.

A 1967 article in the *People's Daily* directly addressed the importance of the relative positioning of Lenin and Stalin, and the conceptualisation of Lenin in popular representations (Fan 1967). In a critique of Soviet revisionism as applied to Lenin, the article rehearsed debates about Lenin's status as exalted leader versus his human characteristics. The primary purpose of the article was not to engage in a dialogue on cult of personalities. Official Chinese commentary on that issue belonged to a past—and future—moment; at this moment, the cult of Mao circulated widely. Instead, the article emphasised the important contributions of Leninism, arguing that Leninist revolutionary theory lived within the Soviet people and the world's revolutionary people. The final sentence harnessed 'the glory of Leninism' (列宁主义的光芒) to the 'bright sun' (毛泽东思想的太阳) of Maoism. By conflating Lenin, the historical figure representative of the October Revolution, with Leninism as revolutionary theory, an alternative geography of revolution could emerge. No longer was this revolution a fanning out from a Soviet centre; rather revolutionary movements inspired by the October Revolution became part of the Chinese vision with Maoism the contemporary instantiation of revolution and champion of anti-imperialist culture and praxis.

Screenings in 1967 of *Lenin in Poland*, and the discussion of these screenings in the press, reinforced the role Lenin films played in drawing a new revolutionary map. In this

instance, *Lenin in Poland* received praise for being a prime example of realism that enabled the masses to fully appreciate the spirit and life of Lenin. The linking of the Soviet Union, Poland, and China through Lenin films reminded audience members of the common anti-imperialist struggle and its success in Eastern Europe. At this historical moment, the anti-imperialist struggle was the primary lens of analysis through which Lenin and the Soviet Union were to have meaning for the Chinese public.

This preoccupation with anti-imperialist struggle and its relationship to Lenin films constituted the central refrain in the first lengthy article since the early 1950s on Lenin films published in the *People's Daily* in November 1969. The article commenced with reference to Lenin films demonstrating the great influence and meaning of Lenin and Stalin's proletarian struggle. It then quickly moved in characteristic fashion to establish the links between Marxism-Leninism and anti-imperialist struggle, with a concerted emphasis on the worldwide dimension of the struggle. The article explicitly stated that the October Revolution was the beginning of this struggle and that 'we' cannot allow the flag of revolutionary struggle to fall. Only under the leadership of Marxism, Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought could worldwide victory be achieved. This marked the strongest articulation of Lenin films in terms of the revolutionary ideological triumvirate as a replacement of the triumvirate of state leadership that shaped interpretations of Lenin films in the early 1950s.

films became part of the collective memory of the PRC, we can see how these films, like Qu Qiubai's rendition of 'The Internationale', exist within a paradox of expressing belief in socialist internationalism and liberation of 'all slaves of the world' and performing loyalty to the authority of ruling leaders and party-states (Chen 2016).

In the current moment, excerpts from Lenin films appear on Chinese screens, as nods to Mao-era collective memory. Whether in films such as *Seal of Love* (2010) or *In the Heat of the Sun* (1994), or CCTV television series including *The Sun Rises from the East* (2001), these excerpts once again seek to forge lineages of legitimacy. However, Lenin now appears not as a theorist of socialist internationalism, but sutured to aesthetics of Chinese nationalism. The national 'revitalisation' of contemporary China may benefit from a Leninist political structure, but it rests upon a geopolitical landscape of patriotic flags and allegiance to the Chinese state that eschews internationalism as a political project. The Mao era positive reception of Lenin's fierce opposition to 'Great-Russian chauvinism'—and its localisation into an opposition to 'Han chauvinism'—has no place in contemporary China's global political imaginary. The political potentiality of socialist internationalism debated through Lenin films in the 1950s and 1960s China has been replaced in the twenty-first century by excerpts that flicker in the background of China's past as a depoliticised haunting aesthetic of nostalgia that reinforces Party legitimacy and state nationalism. ■

Flickers of the Past

It is through this lens of the primacy of anti-imperialist struggle as both revolutionary goal and critique of the Soviet Union that by the late 1960s Lenin films functioned in China. The films thereby were used to support the Cult of Mao rather than the Cult of Stalin. By outlining the layered ways in which Lenin

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