Two years ago I began a project, Translating New China’s Cinema for English-Speaking Audiences, to bring Maoist cinema to students and educators in the US. Several genres from this era’s cinema are represented in the fifteen films we have subtitled to date, including those of heroic revolutionaries (geming yingxiong), workers-peasants-soldiers (gongnongbing), minority peoples (shaoshu minzu), thrillers (jingxian), a children’s film, and several love stories. Collectively, these films may surprise teachers and students alike. To be sure, they are not subtle in justifying the Communist victory nor the correctness of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) policy. However, film-makers’ earnest and vigorous depictions of the common people and their lives, and of economic reconstruction, offer educators the opportunity to humanize a people and an era that has often been demonized in the West and to reflect explicit aspects of cultural history unknown to non-Chinese audiences.

In addition to providing a window to Chinese culture and history for educators and students, we hope this project stimulates a discourse on the significance of Maoist cinema. There is comparatively a dearth of written analysis on this era’s films, but energetic debates are underway in China with at least four identifiable schools of thought. The theoretical approaches of these schools vary according to the themes they wish to emphasize. So-called negation [chuan foudingde] scholars tend to emphasize ‘art for art’s sake’ or the heavy-handed politics of this era. Meanwhile, leftists [zuopai], including many veteran Maoist-era film-makers, continue to defend art that serves the people, downplaying political interference. Two other schools are the perfectionists [wanmeide], who feel that Maoist cinema substantially fulfilled its educational and entertainment obligations, and centrists [zhongjianlu], like Meng Liye, who identify the artistic achievements of the era’s cinema even as they criticize the heavy-handedness of Maoist political administrators. To date, only the centrists have published book-length monographs that include empirical examples to support their theses (please see the annotated bibliography at the end of this article).

Despite differences in perspective on Maoist cinema, general agreement exists as to the demarcation of its five distinctive phases (four of which are represented in our program). The initial phase of economic recovery (1949–52) began with the emergence of the Dongbei (later Changchun) Film Studio as China’s new film capital. The studio, originally built by the Japanese in 1938, produced the first heroic revolutionary (geming yingxiong) and worker-peasant-soldier (gongnongbing) films in the new People’s Republic (PRC). Among the best of these are two films from our program, Daughters of China [Zhonghua nu’er](1949) and Gate #6 [Liu hao men](1952).

Daughters of China, one of the PRC’s first features, is based on the true story of eight women soldiers who sacrificed themselves rather than surrender to the Japanese. Although its production values are quite modest, the film is valuable to educators and students above the eighth grade because of its historical immediacy and documentary-like quality. Veteran director Ling Zifeng authentically depicted the brutal Japanese consolidation of poverty-stricken wartime villages, the Chinese refugees’ frantic struggle for food, and the socioeconomic and ethnic diversity of anti-Japanese opposition. He also coaxed an inexperienced cast to
convey the sense of outrage and desperation many Chinese villagers felt at the hands of the Japanese. Also, a remarkable variety of dialects by the film’s actors gives indication of the “melting pot” quality that marked Dongbei Studio personnel in this early period.

*Gate #6* ([Jiao xin](1952)) gives educators and viewers extraordinary insight to the plight of Tianjin dockworkers at the hands of their penurious bosses just before and after the Communist victory. Filmed on location with its largely non-professional cast and employing many actual dockworkers, this film sometimes also resembles a documentary. *Gate #6* is notable for the debut of charismatic, bus-ticket-seller-turned-actor Guo Zhenqing, who plays a starving, vengeance-minded dockworker, Hu Er, and for a bravura performance by veteran Xie Tian as the dockyard boss Ma Jinlong. Educators and students sixth grade and above will easily recognize straightforward themes of revenge, oppression, and especially, the workers’ optimism at the Communist liberation. For additional context, *Gate #6* also includes an original fourteen-minute prologue featuring particulars about the film, film-makers, and its historical significance.

**Phase Two. From the Wu Xun zhuan Movement to the Anti-Rightist Campaign: the Revival of Shanghai’s Film Industry (1952–57)**

The second phase of Maoist cinema, from 1952 to late 1957, began with the Mao Zedong-led movement in 1951 to criticize *Wu Xun zhuan* ([The Story of Wu Xun](1951))—a film he viewed as servile and promoting education at the expense of Marxist ideology—and ended with the Anti-Rightist campaign. Despite these obstructive political movements and the end of private studio productions, China’s film industry eventually increased its output and also moved beyond staple heroic revolutionary and worker-peasant-soldier themes to include thrillers, love stories, and children’s films. Shanghai also recovered its pre-eminent status as China’s film capital in these years, as indicated by the five films in our program from the second phase.

*Reconnaissance Across the Yangzi* ([Dujiang zhencaji](1954)) follows Chinese Communist scouts sent to locate Nationalist artillery positions before the decisive civil war battle in Shanghai. More elaborate and complex than the earlier *Daughters of China*, educators will find *Reconnaissance* reflects with reasonable accuracy the CCP’s military strategy and People’s Liberation Army (PLA)-local militia relationships. *Reconnaissance* also features a suspenseful story, elements of a thriller, and a poignantly understated love story between scout leader Commander Li and a village girl, Fourth Sister Liu, who years before had saved his life. Most important, *Reconnaissance* brought legitimacy to a beleaguered Shanghai Film Studio, gaining first-class recognition for best picture (one of only four films to be so honored between 1949 and 1957), director Tang Xiaodan, and lead actor Sun Daolin. Because of its seminal influence, we have also created an original, seventeen-minute prologue including details about the making of *Reconnaissance*, its cast and crew, and its place in PRC cinema history.

*The Little Messenger* ([Jiao xin](1954)), one of the PRC’s first children’s films, is suitable for American elementary students and above. Able filmmaker Shi Hui, assisted by a youthful Xie Jin, examined Chinese village life and the Anti-Japanese War through the eyes of young shepherd Hai Wa, who has been entrusted to deliver a secret letter. Japanese military leaders and their Chinese puppet troops are portrayed as cartoon-like figures with bulging eyes and buck teeth. Under a less experienced director, the comic relief they provide might detract from the film’s overall suspense and gravity. However, Shi Hui’s accurate portrayals of the early-warning communication system, often operated by children, as well as of the extraordinary efforts of villagers to protect their grain from Japanese invaders, more than offset these commonplace stereotypes.

Three films completed just prior to the Anti-Rightist campaign in 1957 are indicative of the relaxed atmosphere in the Hundred Flowers Period directly preceding it. *The City That Never Sleeps* ([Bu ye cheng](1957)) features a rare portrayal of a Shanghai industrialist who survives the Nationalist-era inflationary spiral after 1949 and who eventually sees the state take over his textile business. This melodrama’s vision of capitalism—both before and after 1949—is
uneven, to be sure, especially for a group of actual Shanghai capitalist-consultants to the production who criticized Ke Ling’s script as illogical. However, director Tang Xiaodan offers compelling details about the inflation, including the daily price increases, rough queuing for precious metals and commodities, and especially, the inexorable movement of capital from productive investment to speculative ventures.

Equally interesting for students ninth grade and above is the portrayal of industrialist Zhang Bohan and his family after the Communist takeover. Zhang retains his factory and palatial estate, and through the gentle persuasion of his employees and state officials, comes to realize the error of seeking profit at the expense of his factory workers and the state. Finally, he voluntarily merges his factory with a jointly-run state operation and reconciles with his estranged daughter in the process. Although The City That Never Sleeps was not shown on a regular basis for more than twenty years, its unusual theme, elaborate sets, outstanding cast, and distinctive characterizations make it well worth seeing.

An interesting phenomenon of this second phase is the informal revival of the so-called star system. The heightened visibility of individual film-makers, especially those like Tang Xiaodan and Sun Daolin, both active before the liberation, coincided significantly with the restoration of Shanghai as China’s film capital. This trend continued after 1954 and is particularly evident in films like The City That Never Sleeps and Diary of a Nurse [Hushi riji](1957). Diary of a Nurse features prolific director Tao Jin and an experienced Shanghai cast led by marquee actress Wang Danfeng. She plays Jian Shuhua, recently graduated from a Shanghai nursing school. She insists on working at a remote construction site despite the objections of her doctor-fiancée, who is ensconced in Shanghai. At the construction site (an actual site in Inner Mongolia), she fends off the advances of a male colleague, deals with the jealousy of another co-worker, and receives an ultimatum from her fiancée to return to Shanghai. Of chief interest to educators and students ninth grade and above is the film’s mixture of playful elements one might associate with bourgeois Shanghai culture, especially in the glamorous and beautiful Wang Danfeng, along with more orthodox communist rhetoric about party, reconstruction, and serving the people. The schizophrenic quality of the film is evident in Wang Danfeng’s initial visit to the construction site; the contrast between her selfless devotion to the workers and her diva-like appearance is readily apparent.

The Story of Liu Bao Village [Liu bao de gushi], the third film in our series from 1957, also reflects the relaxed political atmosphere of the later second phase even as it differs from the two Shanghai films above in its budget, aura, and inexperienced cast. Produced by the Chinese Army’s August First studio in Beijing, the film recounts a tale of forbidden love between a peasant girl and a soldier whose unit is passing through her village. For the first time, PRC film-makers explored the psychology of a soldier tormented by divided loyalties. Educators and students ninth grade and above will note how soldier Li Jin, especially in his affection for the villager Ermeizi, portrays a less wooden, orthodox “socialist realism” than an earlier soldier (from 1955), Dong Cunrui. The film is noteworthy also for examining the relationship between the sometimes-cautious relationship between the PLA and villagers in a manner that informs without due exaggeration. Also of interest to educators are views of arranged relationships, overturning feudalism (in the form of the landlord and the villain Liu Huzi, both of whom wield absolute power over Ermeizi’s family), and the issue of gender equality. Regarding the latter, remarkable parallels can be found between Ermeizi and the peasant girl Cuiqiao in Chen Kaige’s film Yellow Earth (1984), the feature that introduced the entire Fifth generation of Chinese films.

Phase Three. The Great Leap Forward (1958–60)

The third phase of Maoist cinema, encompassing the Great Leap Forward, began in 1958 and ended in 1960. Exhorted politically to build a “greater, faster, better, and more economical” China, the film industry registered impressive production increases in the first
female director Wang Ping’s Shanghai enables Li Xia to live comfortably as a merchant by day (his legitimate “cover”), to fall in love with and to marry his “merchant wife,” and to enjoy their young son and circle of friends (most of whom are fellow CCP members living in disguise). Yet Shanghai is also supposed to be murky and filled with intrigue and moral decadence. The sumptuous apartment and gaudy dress of puppet and Nationalist agents, especially Li Li’na, a courtesan who attaches herself easily to men she finds useful, were meant to be shown in a negative light but in fact often generated the opposite reaction from audiences. Other elements of the film that still resonate include the harrowing existence of CCP members living in Shanghai in these years, the widespread sympathy for the Communist cause among the working class, artists, and students in Shanghai, and the formidable intelligence networks set up by the ruling puppets of the Japanese, and, after 1945, by the Nationalists. Less satisfactory is the love story, which is woefully underdeveloped (especially when compared to the one in The Story of Liu Bao Village, also a Wang Ping-directed film), and several cartoon-like characters.

The optimistic zeal and innocence peculiar to the Leap are captured well in the project’s two films from 1959. My Day Off [Jintian wo xiuxi] provides an informative look at the arranged engagement of a policeman, Ma Tianming, and of a model female postal worker, Liu Ping. Perhaps, because of its low budget (70,000 RMB, including 17 yuan total for costumes), the film offers educators and students ninth grade and above will find fascinating the ambivalent attitude that PRC film-makers not living in Shanghai often exhibited toward bourgeois Shanghai culture. In a positive way, female director Wang Ping’s Shanghai enables Li Xia to live comfortably as a merchant by day (his legitimate “cover”), to fall in love with and to marry his “merchant wife,” and to enjoy their young son and circle of friends (most of whom are fellow CCP members living in disguise). Yet Shanghai is also supposed to be murky and filled with intrigue and moral decadence. The sumptuous apartment and gaudy dress of puppet and Nationalist agents, especially Li Li’na, a courtesan who attaches herself easily to men she finds useful, were meant to be shown in a negative light but in fact often generated the opposite reaction from audiences. Other elements of the film that still resonate include the harrowing existence of CCP members living in Shanghai in these years, the widespread sympathy for the Communist cause among the working class, artists, and students in Shanghai, and the formidable intelligence networks set up by the ruling puppets of the Japanese, and, after 1945, by the Nationalists. Less satisfactory is the love story, which is woefully underdeveloped (especially when compared to the one in The Story of Liu Bao Village, also a Wang Ping-directed film), and several cartoon-like characters.

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several ways to educators and students above the sixth grade. First, its frankly bourgeois and melodramatic examination of a Shanghai neighborhood during the Great Leap complements rather than duplicates the community perspective in My Day Off. Second, a variety of women characters dominate the film, including three housewives, a feudal-minded mother-in-law, and two youthful single model workers. Their contributions to production, put forth with a can do enthusiasm, suggest how China tried to export its light industrial production in these two years. Ironically, however, the unintended truths embodied in the skepticism of the mother-in-law, resonate still and offer poignant insight to the Leap’s failures.

Phase Four. The Thermidorean Interregnum (1961–65)

The final five films in our series date from the so-called thermidorean interregnum or the fourth phase of Maoist cinema (1961–65). For these four years, a comparative moderation and tolerance of cinematic art replaced “politics in command.” Red Detachment of Women [Hongse niangzijun](1961) is an outstanding example of what film historian Zhiwei Xiao refers to as the successful integration of politics and art. This feature gives stylish treatment to the first women’s company in the Red Army on Hainan Island in the early 1930s. Teachers will find much to recommend in the dramatic interweaving of the three main roles: a servant girl-turned-guerrilla out to avenge her father’s death; the company’s virile male CCP secretary who, disguised as an overseas merchant, recruits her; and most important, the tyrant-landlord who opposes them and attempts to liquidate the Communists. Red Detachment swept China’s first Hundred Flowers awards for best picture, best director (Xie Jin), actress (newcomer Zhu Xijuan), and supporting actor (Chen Qiang). Its theatrical lighting and dramatic camera angles are reminiscent of 1940’s American film noir, and in fact, Xie Jin has been cited by several Chinese commentators for directing in a “Hollywood style.” Disturbing elements are present as well; mob violence and parading through the streets presage the worst excesses of the Cultural Revolution; and revenge, the motivating element for each of the protagonists and one that precludes compromise and ensures a fight to the death between the main protagonists.

Li Shuangshuang [Li Shuangshuang](1962), the twelfth film in our series, is a comedy-drama detailing a couple’s travails as they implement a work-point system in a rural commune. It garnered Hundred Flowers awards for best picture, screenplay, actress, and supporting actor. Educators will find compelling the biting commentary on the institutionalized corruption existing in Chinese villages, and this after playwright Li Zhun softened his original 1959 story for the screen. Li Zhun also movingly depicts the earthiness of ordinary village life, particularly in the main characters. The
title role is arguably the signature performance of Zhang Ruifang’s
career; her idealistic wife is selfless, open, and so principled as the
production team leader that she turns in her husband to the local sec-
tary. Convincing too is Zhong Xinghuo’s impressionable husband,
who symbolizes the easy inertia of a “live and let live” tradition.

The final three films share the common theme of oppression in
the years before 1949. Little Soldier Zhang Ga [Xiaobing Zhang Ga](1963) follows the exploits of a youthful scout during the anti-
Japanese war and as a children’s film, is a good companion to the
earlier Little Messenger. Daji and Her Two Fathers [Daji he tade
fuqin](1961) introduces the Yi nationality of southern China amidst
a melodramatic story of mistaken identity, parental anguish, and
economic reconstruction. Daji also offers a rare positive portrayal of
intellectuals and book-learning during these seventeen years. Our
fifteenth film, Serfs [Nongnu], a story of Tibetan feudalism, created
a stir when it was released in 1963. Screenwriter Huang Zongjiang
took the unusual step of making the film’s protagonist a mute,
unwilling to speak of the horrors of slavery before the Communist
victory. Use of a largely native Tibetan cast also makes Serfs unique
even among minority films made before 1966.

Our project, funded through grants from the Hemingway Foun-
dation and the Utah Humanities Council, will continue until May
2008. By that time we hope to have translated and subtitled an addi-
tional twenty-three films from the 1949–76 period, including films
from each of the five phases. Films from the project are available to
educators through Interlibrary Loan at the Stewart Library, Weber
State University, 2901 University Circle, Ogden, UT 84408-2901
(or contact Debbie Stephenson at dstephenson2@weber.edu or by
phone at 801-626-6384). ■

Translating New China’s Cinema
for English-Speaking Audiences

The fifteen films translated and subtitled to date:
1. Daughter of China [Zhonghua mu’er], 1949. 86 minutes.
2. Gate #6 [Liu hao men], 1953. 96 minutes.
   Includes 14-minute video prologue (133 visual images).
3. The Little Messenger [Ji mao xin], 1954. 67 minutes.
4. Reconnaissance Across the Yangzi [Duijiang zhenchaji], 1954.
   103 minutes. Includes 17-minute video prologue (157 visual
   images).
5. The City That Never Sleeps [Bu ye shao shi dianbo], 1957. 114 minutes.
6. Diary of a Nurse [Hushi riji], 1957. 97 minutes.
   72 minutes.
8. The Unfailing Radio Wave [Yong bu shaoshide dianbo], 1958.
   112 minutes.
10. Women of the Great Leap Forward [Wan zi qian hong zong shi
   chun], 1959. 110 minutes.
   114 minutes.
12. Li Shuangshuang [Li Shuangshuang], 1962. 108 minutes.
13. Little Soldier Zhang Ga [Xiaobing Zhang Ga], 1963. 95 minutes.
14. Daji and Her Two Fathers [Daji he tade fuqin], 1963.
   100 minutes.
15. Serfs [Nongnu], 1963. 90 minutes.

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Meng Liye. “Jicheng yu fayang xin Zhongguo dianying de youxiu chuantong” [Carrying on and developing New China’s outstanding cinematic tradition], *Dianying yishu [Film art]* 218 (1991–3), 9–13. Straightforward discussion by most prominent of centrist scholars, discusses how prominent film themes of the 1949 to 1966 period, such as socialist reconstruction, patriotism, and heroism, intermingled with traditional Chinese and foreign artistic techniques. Includes necessary historical context.


Pan Ruojian. “Shiqi nian xin Zhongguo dianying de huihuang yu candan” [Seventeen Years of Chinese Film Glory and Misery], *Dianying yishu [Film Art]* 233 (1993–6), 39–44. Concise reflection by centrist scholar on two-edged political ideology, which both inspired and limited artistic creativity and achievement in Chinese cinema, 1949–66.


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**GREG LEWIS** teaches Asian and World History as an Associate Professor at Weber State University, Ogden, Utah. His ongoing project, “Translating New China’s Cinema for English-Speaking Audiences,” calls for the subtitling of thirty-eight significant Maoist-era Chinese films (1949–76) in the next five years. Lewis also plans to write a monograph on the historical development of Maoist cinema and to assemble a four-hour English-language documentary on the same subject.