Book Reviews

Rethinking Propaganda, Sensory Rituals, and Audience Agency in *Cinematic Guerrillas*

Review of *Cinematic Guerrillas: Propaganda, Projectionists, and Audiences in Socialist China* by Jie Li, University of California Press, 2023

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"If media theorist Marshall McLuhan defined media technologies as 'the extensions of man,' [then] Maoist guerrilla-inspired ideology and practice turned human beings into flexible extensions of media technology."[1] So writes Jie Li, a professor of East Asian languages and civilizations at Harvard University, in her new book *Cinematic Guerrillas: Propaganda, Projectionists, and Audiences in Socialist China*. Building on McLuhan's concept, Li draws on the anthropologist AbdouMaliq Simone's notion of "people as infrastructure" and the media scholar Joshua Neves's idea of "people as media infrastructure" to reshape our understanding of propaganda during the Mao era.[2] Through this lens, she demonstrates that propaganda was disseminated not only through mass media but also enacted and embodied by the masses themselves, who became part of the media ecosystem.

1. Jie Li, *Cinematic Guerrillas: Propaganda, Projectionists, and Audiences in Socialist China* (University of California Press, 2023), 3.
2. AbdouMaliq Simone, "People as Infrastructure: Intersecting Fragments in Johannesburg," *Public Culture* 16, no. 3 (2004): 407–29; Joshua Neves, *Underglobalization: Beijing's Media Urbanism and the Chimera of Legitimacy* (Duke University Press, 2020).

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The core argument of this book is that in Maoist China, cinema functioned not only as a tool of propaganda but also as a conduit for embodiment, ritual, enchantment, and revolutionary participation, shaped as much by projectionists and audiences as by the state itself. The author's purpose is to theorize "propaganda as proselytization, mediation as mediumship, and reception as ritual participation."[3] Borrowing from Maoist warfare rhetoric, Li's term "cinematic guerrillas" refers to a range of people in Maoist propaganda networks: mobile projectionists who brought cinema and other media to the Chinese populace, guerrilla fighters celebrated in revolutionary films, and audience members who used guerrilla cinema-going and reception strategies to subvert propaganda goals. These human nodes fundamentally formed the core of Mao's propaganda infrastructure, embodying, mediating, and executing the revolution.[4] Li points out that little scholarly attention has been given to the people who watched and attended the cinema in socialist China, raising questions of "Who was cinema?" and "What do people do with and to cinema/media?"[5] In answering these questions, Li advocates for a shift in media studies toward a "recentering of the human body and spirit," highlighting human agency within media networks and mediation processes, thereby underscoring the importance of both messengers and audiences.

Cinematic Guerrillas is divided into two parts, consisting of a total of eight chapters, an introduction, and an epilogue. The first section centers on projectionists, their training, careers, performances, gender issues, and entrepreneurial practices. The second section turns attention to audiences and their reception of socialist cinema, exploring open-air cinema experiences, creative responses to propaganda films, foreign films, and what is referred to as "poisonous weeds" cinema.

3. Guaraná, Bruno. "Cinematic Guerrillas: A Conversation with Jie Li," *Film Quarterly* 77, no. 2 (Winter 2023), https://filmquarterly.org/2023/12/12/cinematic-guerrillas-a-conversation-with-jie-li/.
4. Li, *Cinematic Guerrillas*, 3.
5. Li, 26–30.

In this decade-long research project, Jie Li draws on Mao Zedong's theories of guerrilla warfare developed during the anti-Japanese war (the Second Sino-Japanese War) to foreground a guerrilla media theory. Li employs what she calls a "guerrilla methodology"—a flexible and resourceful approach that reflects the improvisational tactics of this style of warfare and the practices of media workers during the Mao era. She combines archival research with an expansive corpus of "memory texts," including memoirs and periodicals from more than twenty provinces. Additionally, Li conducted ethnographic fieldwork and provides oral histories with former projectionists and audiences, thus providing a grassroots account of how propaganda was created, circulated, and experienced. This innovative approach privileges media as a lived practice and highlights grassroots views. It also decentralizes hegemonic narratives by including rural projectionists and the masses.

One of Li's striking conceptual interventions is her analogy of Maoist propaganda as "revolutionary spirit mediumship." This metaphor sheds new light on cinema as a material, affective, and ritualized process. She argues that the revolutionary spirit was transmitted through media and mediated by human bodies, particularly mobile projectionists. Despite the state's opposition to religious traditions, the Maoist media network retained a ritualistic structure by replacing ancestral devotion with what Li terms "new political religiosities." Projectionists functioned like ideological shamans or missionaries, carrying films, records, slides, and live performances into remote areas to combat "feudal" thinking and promote communist consciousness. This assertion disrupts the view of propaganda as solely an ideological text and reorients our understanding to include its affective dimension.

Li adds another layer to the role of spirit mediums by identifying projectionists as agents who personify media labor. Chapter 2 highlights the physical and infrastructural dimensions of their work: Projection teams carried heavy reels, projectors, generators, and loudspeakers across mountains, paddy fields, and rough roads—battling mud, monsoon weather, and power

outages to set up outdoor screenings. This labor was central to cinema's operation and illustrates "cinema's physicality in terms of both corporeality and materiality."[6] She argues projectionists were more than film facilitators; they were extensions of the media system—living nodes connecting ideology, logistics, and infrastructure. In so doing, Li invites us to reconsider the labor performed by projectionists as the connective tissue of the propaganda apparatus, in which their bodies serve as vehicles for extending media technology. To sum up, Li describes projectionists as purveyors of propaganda who gave face and voice to the cinema experience, being honored as "labor models or superheroes" and praised for sacrificing and enduring hardships for the revolution.[7]

Additionally, in chapter 3, Li explores issues of gender through the case of the Hebei Three Sisters Movie Team, a mobile unit of female projectionists hailed as exemplary models of womanhood. Here, she explores their contributions and the challenges of navigating traditional gender roles and revolutionary ideals in socialist China. Li's analysis of gender contributes to an intersectional account of propaganda while revealing the tension between propaganda and practice, in which women's bodies and voices are used and constrained in service of the revolution. In this analysis, Li encourages readers to confront the utility of remembering women as "cultural cavalries" whose labor is often unacknowledged in histories.

Chapter 4 presents cinema as a medium of economic transaction. Although they appeared to be free or inexpensive, film screenings depended on local contributions, such as rural audiences providing labor, food, and sometimes housing for projection teams. As Li notes, cinema thus served as a covert means of extracting economic resources—grain, labor, and money—from rural communities to support political mobilization.[8] Li's examination of this "ritual economy" is significant because it reinterprets the

6. Li, 89.
7. Li, 72.
8. Li, 122.

consumption of socialist films through the lens of sacrifice for the collective interest of accessing "spiritual food."[9]

Moving from projectionists and their practices, the author shifts her focus to audiences and reception in the second part of the book. She assesses how audiences have become coconstructors of cinema's meaning and experience. Chapter 5 parses out the multisensorial ways in which audiences engaged with and experienced cinema. Film screenings became like temple festivals where audiences participated in both political education and social ritual. In this context, audiences were expected to consume propaganda and become active disseminators of revolutionary affect "in a moving and exhilarating process akin to spiritual possession by the Holy Ghost."[10]

Building on the sensorial focus, chapter 6 discusses the concept of "guerrilla reception." It explains how film texts encourage viewers to adopt guerrilla techniques and promote "participatory surveillance," especially through the involvement of projectionists.[11] This process transforms propaganda into participatory action. Chapter 7 explores how audiences interpret and receive foreign films from Soviet, North Korean, Albanian, and Indian cinemas. Chapter 8 concludes by examining the state's efforts to address "criticism screenings" by exposing audiences to censored films in controlled environments to boost ideological resilience. These latter chapters collectively reveal the tensions between cinematic control and creative reception. They evince Li's argument that cinema in Mao's era functioned as a living infrastructure, simultaneously sponsored by the state and collectively redefined by its audience.

Overall, *Cinematic Guerrillas* offers a profound rethinking of propaganda and cinema culture in socialist China and, more broadly, of film history. The book makes a compelling case for studying the people in exhibition contexts, particularly projectionists and audiences, as active cocreators of

9. Li, 136–41.
10. Li, 5.
11. Li, 177.

ideology, ritual, and media frameworks. Li's guerrilla-style research mirrors the decentralized networks she studies, creating an archive of Maoist media circulation from the ground up. One of the book's strengths is its focus on propaganda as a tangible, embodied value, reconceptualizing it as "revolutionary spirit mediumship" aimed at turning audiences into congregations. For readers and scholars of film and media studies, Asian studies, propaganda studies, and cultural and historical studies, this book is an insightful and valuable resource. Li's work raises further questions about the response to urban screenings and films about ethnic minorities in socialist China.