



# BrillOnline *Primary Sources*

[Home](#) > [Chinese Film and Newsreel Scripts from the Cultural Revolution Online](#)

## Chinese Film and Newsreel Scripts from the Cultural Revolution Online



Documentary films and newsreels were two of the major mass media and communication channels in China from the 1950's through the 1970's. They covered all aspects of social activities, though the emphasis was on developments in the building of a socialist country. The bulk of the items in the collection are transcripts for the documentary films and newsreels from the Cultural Revolution, 1966-1976.

[More information on Brill.com](#)

[Contents](#)

[Background](#)

[Location of originals](#)

### Background: Scripting Chinese realities – Documentaries for the people

by *Stefan Landsberger*

Ever since its inception in 1921, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has invested great efforts and resources in propagating its policies, views and ideals. In the early days of the Party, most of its propaganda was presented in written forms such as newspapers and journals, proof of the largely urban and intellectual background of the young revolutionaries among its ranks. As the CCP cast around for support for its revolutionary ideals, it increasingly became aware of a structural inability to address target groups of potential followers. Classic Marxism, recently infused at the time with Soviet leader V.I. Lenin's organizational insights that had proven to be so successful in the Soviet Union, called for a focus on the most exploited segment of the population, i.e., the workers, to become the vanguard for the revolution. In the Chinese case, however, the number of workers in society simply was too small to fulfill the historic task of leading the proletarian revolution. Already in 1929, discussions were underway within the Chinese Party leadership about which other class than the workers could bear revolutionary responsibility. One of the proponents who suggested focusing on the peasantry was Mao Zedong, who later emerged as the leader of the CCP and the founder of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Once the mobilization of the numerically much stronger segment of the rural population had become official policy, the question of how to address the peasants became tantamount. By and large, the fact that the majority of those living in the countryside was illiterate and could not be reached by the written word, forced the CCP to look for various means of visual communications to convey the programs and policies that the Party stood for: pictorial magazines, cartoons and comics, propaganda leaflets, public announcements, declarations, wall news papers, and costumed propaganda, often based on traditional local and folk examples, were widely adapted to this purpose. Some of these visual communication techniques were of distinctly Soviet origin, but they had been sufficiently Sinified in terms of contents to appeal to the population; others were based directly on traditional modes of expression popular in the countryside. Whatever their inspiration, the arts were to serve the political demands of the CCP. After the founding of the PRC in 1949, the CCP continued to use these and other communication media for propaganda purposes, with varying degrees of intensity and success in various periods. When Chinese society was politicized increasingly in the 1950s and 1960s, visual propaganda became to be seen as one of the most effective ways to propagate behavioral demands and attitudinal indications among the people.

Right from the start, the decision to use images for propaganda purposes raised many questions about representation,

meaning and interpretation. In many ways, the assigning of standardized, predetermined complexes of interpretation to visual information involved in this practice resembled the Chinese penchant to formalize language into tifa, formulations or set phrases, preferably, but not necessarily, including numbers ('Three-Eight Work style', 'One Country, Two Systems', 'Five-Good Students', but also the more recent 'Reform and Opening up' and 'Peaceful Rise', and many other examples). In such phrases, complex ideas or arguments often were reduced to sets of characters that were easy to memorize. The coining of these set phrases called for lengthy committee meetings – often at the highest levels of power – where the contents and intentions were debated just as hotly as the alliterative qualities of a formulation. By uttering a set phrase, everybody understood the meaning, intention and attitude of the speaker and the latter no longer needed to dwell on long explanations. The repetitive use of these tifa greatly influenced the way the Chinese people saw and interpreted the reality they encountered. The effects of the 'visual set phrases' used in various forms of propaganda were no different.

After 1949, the government's propaganda efforts increased, while at the same time the media at the disposal of the propaganda agencies of both Party and state became more diversified. This intensification of the propaganda efforts took place for a number of reasons. First of all, a large section of the population – the inhabitants of the cities that only recently had come under control of the CCP – still had to be educated about the nature and ideology of the new regime. Moreover, now that the CCP governed all of China, instead of (parts of) the countryside, its policies were no longer focused on narrow agricultural issues and national liberation, but on nation-building, national reconstruction and industrialization. As for the communication channels to be used in these efforts, the People's government was quick to nationalize all of the media to publicize its visions of the new China.

Aside from employing 'old media' such as newspapers, journals and radio broadcasts, the CCP firmly subscribed to Lenin's belief that film was the most revolutionary of all arts and harnessed the sector to its national projects. In the following, I will concentrate on the Party's use of films, both as dramatized feature films and in documentary or newsreel form. The present collection of scripts, found in a cinema company office in Henan Province, China, enables us to see some of the results of the often pain-staking formulations of visual set phrases, even in those cases where the original moving images may no longer be accessible to us.

### **Feature Films**

In line with the general guidelines for the arts that Mao Zedong had formulated in 1942, all arts, including movies, were intended to educate the people in patriotism and socialism and to lift their cultural standards. To ensure these demands on the production side, the film industry was purged after 1949, and by 1953 it was under complete control of the CCP's Propaganda Department and the Ministry of Culture. In essence, some studios formed the base of the movie industry, including the 1 August Studio in Changchun, run by the People's Liberation Army, and the Shanghai Studio that eventually took over the work of the many studios that had been so productive there in the 1920s-1940s, before Liberation, when Shanghai was nothing less than China's Hollywood.

What the feature film scripts collected here, both of Chinese and foreign origin, have in common is that they had been deemed politically healthy and morally uplifting enough for the Chinese masses. One observation must be made about the movie scripts of foreign origin. In a way, their provenance reads as a chronology of China's foreign relations as they indicate which nations were considered friends. The scripts hail from the Soviet Union (1958), Tunisia (undated), Albania (undated, but presumably late 1960s, early 1970s), North-Korea (1970, 1972), France (undated), Japan (1979), and Turkey (undated). Many of the other foreign movies circulating in China are discussed in the journals contained in this collection, in particular Dianying jieshao and the various promotional materials. All these foreign movies are marked by their politically correct contents.

The way these film scripts are drawn up is not always similar. Some of them are merely scenarios. In the case of foreign movies, one has to wonder whether that was for the purpose of censorship. If not that, it may have been to help out those responsible for providing subtitles or for dubbing the soundtrack, or maybe even to allow the projectionists to supply verbal translations. Most of the scripts, however, combine the scenarios with extended information about camera positions, types and length of shots, use of lenses, stage directions, etc.

The film scripts demonstrate that even under circumstances of extreme government oversight, there was a wide variety of movies on offer. They include scripts for color movies, black and white movies, revolutionary plays (for example, a film version of the oral folktale-turned-opera-turned-ballet-turned-model-work ‘The White-Haired Girl’, Baimaonü, from 1971), various types of folk operas, cartoons, paper cut animations, etc. While some of the films by now may be nothing more than a footnote in the cinematographic history of the PRC, some of them actually were quite famous at the time they premiered, for example, *Tunnel Warfare* (Daodizhan, 1965).

### **Documentary films and Newsreels**

Documentary films and news reels were produced by the Central Newsreel and Documentary Film Studio (Zhongyang xinwen jilu dianying zhipian chang), which was established at the central level in Peking in 1953. The importance of the studio also could be gauged from the fact that it functioned as a centrally controlled news agency, in ways that were similar to the operation of the New China News Agency (Xinhua tongxunshu) or the *People’s Daily* (*Renmin ribao*, the official CCP daily newspaper). Where the latter two organizations provided the official printed and written version of events, both for Chinese and foreign consumption, the studio produced the same in moving images. Like the purveyors of the printed word, the studio’s correspondents were dispatched to all areas of the country, and sometimes even abroad. Both the documentaries and the newsreels were shown before feature films at viewings in cinemas and elsewhere. As an opportunity for educating the masses, they probably were considered as being more important than the politically correct entertainment the audience was about to gorge on.

The scripts provide abundant information about the producers and technicians, as well as the types of shot used, the length of the scene, a description of what can be seen on screen, as well as a verbatim record of the voice-over. They form a second by second, image by image record of the reality that Chinese audiences were presented with.

Taking actual events as their subjects, these short films can not avoid reflecting the developments in the political sphere, although it is fair to say that part of the documentaries were for truly recreational purposes. They showed famous scenery and mountains, ancient monuments, and were devoted to developments in the artistic field. Other documentaries featured Chinese achievements in sports and acrobatics. In short, they were intended to make the audience feel proud about the nation. But as an educational medium, they were also used for more serious purposes. They showed audiences, for example, how natural adversities could be dealt with. Such documentaries could report on techniques to combat droughts. Or, even more poignant, during the 1960-1962 famine that followed the grand but failed developmental scheme of the Great Leap Forward, documentaries were made that showed, for example, how tree leaves could be prepared in a tasty manner. Many documentaries were produced that were intended to motivate people to do their utmost, to increase production, to strengthen the nation. These featured the construction of irrigation works, but also model rural communes such as Dazhai (often featuring its secretary, Chen Yonggui), or model industries such as the Daqing Oilfield (with a lot of attention for its model driller, ‘Iron Man’ Wang Jinxi). Finally, the positive developments that CCP rule had brought about for the many national minorities in China, for example the Tibetans, were a recurring theme. As was so often the practice in Chinese propaganda, particularly unique cases were presented as if they occurred regularly.

The newsreels likewise were influenced by the wider developments in the political sphere. Made up of a number of short items, they were devoted to major mass campaigns and to the promotion of production. Many focused on political themes, for example, the successful conclusion of major meetings of the National People’s Congress. Historically interesting are the reports on the visits of leaders of Asian, Latin-American and African nations that China maintained good relations with. However, too much national happiness and success shifts the audience’s attention away from more pressing matters. Some items therefore are devoted to truly inspirational topics, usually revolving around an individual’s personal – often deadly – sacrifice for the common good.

Both documentary materials and newsreels make it clear that they were tools in the hands of those who struggled for power and dominance in the political domain. As the leader worship surrounding Mao Zedong heats up in 1965-1966, on the eve of the Cultural Revolution, both types of films all of a sudden open with a portrait of Mao emanating rays of light, to be followed by a still of an appropriate quote from the Chairman. The programs end in a similar fashion, with an apt Mao aphorism. Mao’s sayings also are quoted liberally in the films’ voice-overs, testifying to the inspiring and guiding qualities

that were ascribed to Mao's Thoughts at the time.

Among the newsreel scripts (*Xinwen jianbao*), some true choice items can be found. One of my personal favorites is the script of the newsreel of September 1968, completely devoted to an event that had taken place the month before. In August, Mao Zedong had received a delegation from Pakistan, headed by the foreign minister. At that occasion, he was presented with a basket of mangoes. According to some stories, Mao actually disliked mangoes, but the fruits were given an important and symbolic role in the complex political situation of the Cultural Revolution. For Mao did not eat the mangoes himself; he donated them to the Peasant-Worker Mao Zedong Thought Propaganda Teams that were sent in to restore order in five factories and two universities in Peking. During the five minutes the item lasts, we see images of Mao, his latest utterances, mangoes, ecstatic masses of people, more Mao, ecstatic soldiers, and more mango mania. The gift itself was turned into a major propaganda opportunity, but its ramifications were even more far-reaching: it signaled the end of Mao's support for the rampant Red Guards and a beginning of the clamp-down on the civil war that was starting to engulf the nation.

Even though the outside world seemed to become less and less relevant as China turned inward and the revolutionary fervor was whipped up in the 1960s, both documentaries and newsreels did provide the Chinese viewers with a small window on international affairs. Aside from the items devoted to the visiting foreign dignitaries mentioned above, China's friendly relations with neighboring countries such as Indonesia, Laos, Burma (Myanmar), Vietnam and others were a recurring theme. These could be visualized through state visits of Chinese leaders. The collection, for example, contains the scripts related to President Liu Shaoqi's and his wife Wang Guangmei's state visit to Indonesia and other Southeast Asian nations in 1963, but visits of Foreign Ministers Zhou Enlai and Chen Yi are reported on as well. A fascinating amount of attention is paid to the Vietnamese conflict. Not only are the (North-) Vietnamese portrayed as valiant warriors against the Satan of imperialism (the USA), but the Chinese actions in support of that struggle – either in terms of shipments of arms, the sending of advisers or even troops – receive wide attention, too. In a way, it seems as if the Vietnamese struggle against America is presented as a vicarious struggle for the Chinese themselves.

### Going to the movies

Despite the often uninspiring and extremely didactic materials on offer, films were extremely popular: in 1964, an estimated 2 billion people went to the movies. They did not necessarily go to a real cinema: by 1964, there were only about 2,000 in the country. More importantly in bringing cinema to the people were the roaming, mobile projection teams, of which some 12,000 were active by 1964. These projection teams, consisting of two to three persons, usually women, traveled around the districts with a power generator, a 16 mm. projector, a gramophone and a slide projector in order to visit the communes and production brigades. Their responsibility was not merely to show movies, documentaries, news reels or other visual materials: they actually functioned as masters of ceremony as well and provided translations and explanations where necessary. Part and parcel of the show was the discussion afterwards, in which the intention of the movies and lessons of what the audience had seen were debated and fortified.

It is clear that even though the images might have been imbued with meaning on their own, those responsible for their production and dissemination left no room for doubts about the anticipated intentions of the movie. The issues of *Xuanchuan cailiao* (*Propaganda Materials*) available in this collection offer everything that is needed for a successful reception of a film. Some of the issues contain as many as the following sections: A short synopsis of the movie; the main propaganda points made by the movie; a scene-by-scene analysis; a short 'teaser'-text that can be used to advertise the movie on the unit's, commune's or organization's publicity blackboard; an introduction to the main players and supporting characters; and lastly, points that need to be raised during the discussion. Similar sections can also be found in the issues of *Dianying jieshao* (*Film News*) that were published later. Obviously, nothing involving the reception of the movies was left to chance.

Of course, television arrived rather late in China. After all, there were more pressing developmental problems that needed to be solved first. Television only started broadcasting in 1958. Broadcasting facilities were set up in Peking by Soviet technicians with Soviet, Polish and Czech equipment and receivers. At that time, about 100.000 TV-sets were available, mostly to be found in the homes of high leaders and function rooms of central government ministries and agencies. Until 1966, all broadcasts were live or on film. By the mid-1970s, total TV-ownership was estimated at about 1 million; most of

these were black-and-white sets produced locally. Over the years, access to television continued to grow, reaching almost complete coverage by the turn of the new millennium. One of the victims of this development was the Central Newsreel and Documentary Film Studio itself, in particular after China Central Television, the new organizational form of state television broadcasting, started producing its own news programs in 1978. Because it could reach more viewers more quickly, the CCTV-news made the old studio newsreels redundant. In 1992, the Studio completely ceased production and it was placed under CCTV-leadership in the following year.

As political situation relaxed after the conclusion of the Cultural Revolution and the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, this is reflected in the feature film-related publications that are part of this collection. With the government increasingly focused on China's economic development, the people started to get more interested in personal enrichment. Moreover, with more money in their pockets than ever before, they were looking for ways to actually have fun. After the culturally numbing decade of the Cultural Revolution, Chinese wanted to be amused rather than be educated by the movies they went to see. The title of the journal *Yinmu huaxu* (Movie titbits) speaks volumes. As for the contents and the chatty tone of this publication, they can not be compared in any way with its more serious predecessors strictly devoted to propaganda.

In conclusion, this collection of film, documentary and newsreel scripts, including the assorted materials devoted to films, their production and contents as well as their reception in general, offer a fascinating insight in the production of this important element of China's propaganda efforts in the three decades when politics reigned supreme.

Cite this page

*Chinese Film and Newsreel Scripts from the Cultural Revolution Online*, advisor: Zhong yang xin wen ji lu dian ying zhi pian chang, Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2006 <<http://primarysources.brillonline.com/browse/chinese-filmscript-and-advertisement-collection-19461985>>