Red Children in Mao's Cinema

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As "revolutionary successors", Chinese children assumed a central role in the nation-making projects of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the era of Mao with their persistent presence in public life as well as in the mass media. However, few have looked into such phenomena. This paper shall investigate representations of Chinese children as political activists, also known as "little red devils", in the war films in Mao's cinema. It focuses on the four most popular children's war films which became Red Classics: *The Letter with Feathers* (1954), *Red Children* (1958), *Zhang Ga the Soldier Boy* (1963), and *Sparkling Red Star* (1974). Together these films show the essential characteristics and experiences a child needed to have to become a political role model during that turbulent time. This study reveals how Maoist cinema imagined young socialist subjects, and how their heroic images were consumed, politicized, and aestheticized to comply with the Party-state's doctrine of class struggles.

In Chinese, the phrase "political activist" (*jiji fenzi*) refers to those who actively participate in politics. While adult political activists join the Communist Party and adolescents aged between sixteen to eighteen join the Communist Youth League, children aged between seven to fifteen join the Communist Children's League (CCL). In the films explored in this study, the four child characters are members of the CCL. In *The Letter with Feathers*, 12-year-old Hai Wa is the commander of the Communist Children's League in his village. In the opening of the film, he stands at the top of a hill holding a red-tasseled spear, a weapon associated specifically with children in the CCL. In *Red Children,* Su Bao and all his friends are likewise members of the CCL. As they start their journey to seek the Red Army in the mountains, nondiegetic music "Song of the Communist Children's League" is introduced to the scene to indicate their identities as the successors of the revolution. In *Zhang Ga the Soldier Boy*, the male protagonist runs errands as a member of the CCL that include taking care of wounded soldiers, keeping watch, fighting in battles, and scouting behind enemy lines. In *Sparkling Red Star*, Pan Dongzi joins the CCL at an early age, following the example of his father who serves in the Red Army and his mother who is a Communist Party member. As role models for Chinese children nationwide, the fervor of these proletarian boys signals that they, nor amyone else, should be satisfied with being merely members of the CCL. Rather, these young characters are portrayed actively seeking further advancement (*jin bu*) in their political careers by expressing strong desires to join the army under the sole leadership of the CCP. The images of highly politicized children emerge on the screen when they simultaneously express strong hatred against the enemy, demonstrate full awareness of class labels, and resolve to exact revenge and retribution.

Standard Periodical Directory Publisher ID# 480178658
ISSN: ISSN 2770-873X
OCLC Number: 1286882178

I. Introduction

To understand the socialist arts created during the Maoist period, one has to be aware of the historical contexts in which they were made. The production of literary works or films were subject to the whimsical changes of state policies affected partially by factional power struggles among the Communists. Coming from the state-owned film studios with production orders derived directly from the Film Bureau of the Cultural Department, all film products needed to be in strict conformity with Maoist principles and socialist ideology. In a planned economy, the Film Bureau was in charge of topic choices, budgeting, sales, assigning working personnel, and production. In a word, the state had full control of the film industry and films were used as pedagogical tools. In spite of this, ironically, during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), many films were severely attacked and purged, including those which later became Red Classics. For instance, when films including *The Letter with Feathers* and *Zhang Ga the Soldier Boy* were condemned as "poisonous grass" (*du cao*), some film workers were publicly humiliated, brutally beaten, exiled to rural regions, and in some cases, driven to suicide.

Although the four films in this paper were made in different time periods, they share a similar narrative motif. Each tell almost the same story: a motherless young boy aspires to be more involved in the revolution, and by going through trials and tests he successfully becomes a child soldier. In 1954, Shanghai Film Studio made *The Letter with Feathers*. When the protagonist Hai Wa embarks on his journey to deliver an important letter to the Eighth Route Army, he runs into a group of Japanese soldiers and is held hostage. To finish his assignment, he must find a way to escape. The second film *Red Children* was made by Changchun Film Studio in 1958, the same year in which the Great Leap Forward (1958-60) took place. After the communist army leaves Southeast China and starts the Long March, the protagonist Su Bao and his friends initiate guerrilla fights and successfully rescue a Communist leader. In 1963, when *Zhang Ga the Soldier Boy* was made by Beijing Film Studio, the conflicts between China and the Soviet Union had deepened, and the CCP accused the USSR of socialist imperialism and revisionism. The film is also an open criticism of *Ivan's Childhood* by Soviet New Wave auteur Andrei Tarkovsky. Zhang Ga seeks to avenge his grandma who is killed by Nationalists. Lastly, *Sparkling Red Star* was produced by August First Film Studio near the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1974. In the story, the boy soldier Pan Dongzi has retribution on his mind for the loss of his mother who was burnt to death by an evil landlord.

In the following sections, I will begin with a discussion of the cultural and historical contexts in which children began to be linked with politics and nationalism in modern China. This is followed by a close look at the four films to demonstrate that although they were made at different times with variations in many aspects, their heroic narratives of young revolutionary stars had to meet certain requirements that served the

Standard Periodical Directory Publisher ID# 480178658
ISSN: ISSN 2770-873X
OCLC Number: 1286882178

pedagogical purpose of the state. Firstly, as lineage theory dominated class struggles to bolster prejudice against outcasts, these model children needed to all have "good" family backgrounds, which were used to draw a line between those who do and do not belong. Secondly, the young characters had to demonstrate their compliance with policies of the Party. Following the "mass line", the Party claimed to always prioritize the interests of the people. The child characters either internalize the mass line or, as the stories progress, learn to become selfless and serve the people at all costs. Thirdly, the films reiterate the idea that the Party is the surrogate parent. In each of the stories, all protagonists lose family members to the war. The Party intervenes, raising and training them, to create a nurturing image of itself. Lastly, while simultaneously downplaying the violence and trauma associated with war, these films create images of courageous and shrewd child soldiers in a mostly cheerful tone, opposite to the more private and humane child victims presented in the Soviet New Wave.

II. Politicized Childhood

In 1962, historian Philippe Ariès traced the emergence of the modern concept of childhood and insightfully pointed out that childhood is a social construct (Bradford 5). Although he mainly examined the family, the child, and the school in France and England before the 19th century, his observation can also be applied to the construction of childhood in China. For much of China's history, children were treated as small adults and there was little recognition of the unique characteristics that separated them from older age groups. For instance, no distinct literature existed for a child audience (Li and Chang 45) and no clothing was designed specifically for children (Wang, Cui, and Liang 115). Also, Chinese tradition of the three cardinal guides (*san gang*) dictates that the ruler guides the subjects, the father guides the son, and the husband guides the wife. These interpersonal relations founded the hierarchy that also leaves the son in a state of oblivion, a powerless position that subjugates him to the father. Chinese did not pay much attention to children until the modern age. The concept of "*ertong*" (children) only appeared in the modern age as China increased exchanges with the outside world. The first occurrences of the Chinese word "*ertong*" on an official document appear as late as 1902 (K. Lu 13).

However, China in the early twentieth century witnessed the collapsing of the imperial Qing and the colonization by foreign powers including Japan and the West. With the national crisis intensified, Chinese reformers came to see Chinese children as the hope and even the savior of the nation and incorporated them into their plans of building the new citizens. In his essay "The Young China", Liang Qichao noted, "If the youth is intelligent, our nation will be intelligent. If the youth is strong, our nation will be strong" (6). Also, Lu Xun called out to the nation to "save the children" in his famous journal "Diary of a Madman" so there would still be hopes for China (Lu 291).

Standard Periodical Directory Publisher ID# 480178658
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From the start, the CCP saw Chinese children as an important social force that could be mobilized for the revolution, and began to actively engage them in political life. Even up to this day, Chinese children are addressed as "revolutionary successors" (*geming jiebanren*). The first children's periodical launched by the CCP in 1927, *Jinan Ertong* (*Saving the Children*), published articles that conveyed complicated political ideas and reported the cruelty of wars. When changing the original name to *Revolutionary Children* (*Geming Ertong*), the editor explained, "We were born into a revolutionary time. Our children should also be revolutionized" (Ma 71). Similarly, when Mao Zedong rose to leadership, he constantly stressed the central role Chinese children played in nation-building projects. In 1937, during a visit to a children's drama group in Wuhan, Mao claimed, "Children are our future, hope and a part of social power, a power-generating army in fighting the Japanese, and the offspring of revolution. You should, on the one hand, overthrow Japanese Imperialism, and on the other hand build a new China" (Lai). Also, in 1967, *Liberation Daily* (*jiefang ribao*), the official newspaper of the municipal committee of the CCP in Shanghai claimed, "Educating our children is not a family trifle but a great affair of the nation and a great revolutionary affair" ("Use" 24). Through the years, the CCP had consistently taken the view that Chinese children needed to shoulder the responsibility of continuing the unfinished proletarian revolution as well as building a modern nation.

As a result, campaigns of promoting child heroes during the Mao era were not uncommon. The most successful example is probably the child martyr Wang Erxiao. Wang is a household name in China. His story is integrated into school textbooks for first graders, and has been adapted for songs, plays, films, and operas. During the Sino-Japanese war, Wang Erxiao was a 13-year-old cowherder, but already a member of the Communist Children's League. One day when he was herding cows, a group of Japanese soldiers came to the village and forced him to guide them. Instead, Wang deliberately led them into an ambush in which he was killed. Poet Fang Bing investigated the incident and incorporated it to the song *Sing Er Xiao* (*gechang wang erxiao*). Later in the same year, *Jin-Cha-Ji Daily* (*Jin cha ji ribao*) published the song and it quickly gained nationwide popularity.

The image of the cowherder Wang Erxiao has ever since appeared repeatedly in various media to inspire patriotism and encourage younger generations to memorize the revolutionary past. For instance, in 2005 Baoding Television Station started the producing of the documentary *Looking For Wang Erxiao* (*xunzhao wangerxiao*) for the 60th anniversary of victory in the Anti-Japanese War. In 2015, the Beijing Huairou Theater turned Wang's story into a children's play *Red Tassel* (*Hongying*). In 2018, Chinese writer Meng Xianming published a 400,000-word book *The Sound of Thirty-Six Gun Shots* (sanshiliu sheng qiangxiang) to retell Wang's story. And to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party in 2021, a children's version of the Peking opera's *Young Hero Wang Erxiao* was performed. Furthermore, there

Standard Periodical Directory Publisher ID# 480178658
ISSN: ISSN 2770-873X
OCLC Number: 1286882178

were numerous news conferences, interviews, and comments to enhance its public influence.

However, this promoting of child martyrs is not without problems; some might have questions about its age-appropriateness. For example, some enquire whether it is justified to make a first grader read such a story. One Chinese scholar asks:

> Is it a bit cruel and straightforward to make first graders face the death of Wang Erxiao who was also a child? Although maybe Wang Erxiao's death provokes hatred among children towards the enemy, what realistic meaning does such death produce for them? If one equates death with patriotism, such patriotism is nonetheless too parochial. (H. Liang 33)

Unsurprisingly, in addition to Wang Erxiao, a 15-year-old girl martyr Liu Hulan, decapitated during the Chinese civil war, appears in the second graders' textbook. These stories are printed alongside reading materials such as "Tadpoles Looking for Mother" and "If You Are Happy, Please Clap Your Hands". It is certainly confusing to include both the brutality of war, which is often labeled as too violent for a child audience, and a fantasy world of talking animals. Andrew Kauffman in his article further points out that "in lionizing the heroic death of the child—the so-called revolutionary successor—stories like Wang Erxiao's also posed an existential threat to the socialist community and brought to the fore tensions intrinsic to politicizing and aestheticizing the death of a child" (34).

While some cast doubts as to whether such promotion of child martyrs is age-appropriate, others show concerns over the impacts of such propaganda on children. Despite the state's willingness to see every child molded into a patriotic revolutionary citizen, some children in reality did not live up to this vision. Melissa A. Brzycki studies deviant children and youth in Shanghai and Tianjin between 1959 and 1964, suggesting a grassroots approach to the revolution (285). A more recent story of "Five Stripe Boy", a young political activist in China, also challenges the state's method of spoon-feeding children with socialist ideologies in order to cultivate revolutionary successors. In 2011, a 14-year-old boy named Huang Yibo, at that time the chief of the Yong Pioneer of China in Wuhan, suddenly became an internet sensation. People called him "Five Stripe Boy" since the highest rank in the Young Pioneers wears only three stripes. Huang's parents introduced him to politics at an early age. At age two, he began to watch CCTV news, a state-run television program, and at seven he became a regular reader of *Reference Information* as well as *China Daily*, both state-owned news platforms. In elementary school, Huang gave many motivational speeches and published more than one hundred papers in various newspapers and tabloids, and his voluntary community service amounted to 716 hours. Additionally, he donated his savings and scholarship money to children in poverty-stricken areas and seniors who needed financial aid. Photographs online show his active involvement in political activities and his countless awards for outstanding political leadership. However, his fame came to an end when he failed to go to any key university due to his poor performance in college entrance exams. In the

Standard Periodical Directory Publisher ID# 480178658
ISSN: ISSN 2770-873X
OCLC Number: 1286882178

post-Mao time, such a trajectory does not constitute a successful life story in the eyes of the more conservative majority.

A. Political Blood lineage

In socialist propaganda, the CCP addresses children as "successors to the great enterprise of communism", but for decades such an identity was not available to everyone. Depending on the profession of the head of the family around 1949, people might fall into the group of "black five categories" (*hei wulei*), including capitalists, landlords, rich farmers, counter-revolutionaries, and bad influencers and rightists. They were marked as social outcasts and enemies of the revolution. It was debated that people with good family backgrounds would more likely continue to have revolutionary attitudes while those with bad family backgrounds would more likely cling to anti-revolutionary attitudes. Anita Chan points out, "These attitudes, it was believed, tended to be transmitted, at least to some degree, from parent to child" (4). Therefore, family background was essential in defining one's identity and position in society.

Revolutionary blood lineage dominated both real life and life on the screen in the Maoist era, and it was essential that the child political activists, whose narratives were reproduced and circulated widely, came from good family backgrounds with revolutionary attitudes. While examining the discourse of blood lineage in the Maoist era, Yi Xiaocuo keenly observes,

> Blood became a form to assess one's revolutionary subjectivity through family background (*chushen*) or class labels (*jieji chengfen*). The 'good ones' were reproduced and circulated as revolutionary agents within the national body, and the 'bad ones' were identified as reactionary or bad blooded and outcast. (18)

Thus, boasting revolutionary pedigrees, the heroic child characters all have already strong ties with the Communist Party in one way or another. Hai Wa's father Lao Zhao is the commander of the militia in Long Men Village, and Hai Wa himself the commander of the village's Communist Children's Group. Zhang Ga's grandma in *Zhang Ga the Soldier Boy* fully supports the Party and even sacrifices her own life protecting one Communist soldier. In *Sparkling Red Star*, before Dongzi's father leaves home to join the Red Army, he encourages his wife to apply to the Communist Party. In order to stall the Nationalist soldiers, Dongzi's mother sacrifices her life so others will have more time to retreat to safety. In all these films, model children come from model families which are already deeply involved in the revolution.

Furthermore, these films make the audience rest assured that the next generation inheriting the revolutionary spirit is highly motivated and active. All stories take place around the Long March when the CCP suffered an enormous loss of soldiers: around 160,000 soldiers went to the Long March but only 15,000 arrived at the final destination. To cope with the challenging recruiting environment, campaigns spared no

Standard Periodical Directory Publisher ID# 480178658
ISSN: ISSN 2770-873X
OCLC Number: 1286882178

efforts to call young men to service. Recruiting slogans such as "Good Boys Want to Join the Eight Route", "Aspired Young Men Go to Battlefields", "Good Parents Want Sons to Take up Arms, Good Wives Send Husbands to Battlefields" were everywhere (X. Chen 24). Under such circumstances, enlisting in the army proved to be supportive of the Party, and children willing to join the army became a motif that prevailed among artistic works of the time. In 1956, Chinese writer Zhang Tianyi received an award for his story about a boy who dreams of joining the People's Liberation Army. Similarly, the same motif was prevalent among children's war films and the desire to join the army expressed through props with symbolic meanings. Thus, in *The Letter with Feathers*, Hai Wa mumbles about getting a military belt, a symbol of the army, as a reward from the commander if he succeeds in the assignment. Su Bao and his friends want rifles badly. They eventually sneak out of their hiding place to kill a Nationalist guard for his rifle. Afterwards, they fight each other just to hold the gun. When the youngest hero Dong Yangzi is dying, his friend puts a pistol in his hand and says, "Look at the pistol you have always wanted!" In *Zhang Ga the Soldier Boy*, Zhang Ga likes guns so much that a soldier makes him a wooden one. Later in a battle, Zhang takes a pistol from a slain enemy. Fearing that his commander will confiscate it,-Zhang hides the pistol in a tree. In *Sparkling Red Star*, Dongzi holds on to a Red Star pin, an embodiment of the Party and the army.

B. The Mass Line

One essential principle of the CCP is the "mass line", extolled as one of the living souls of Maoist ideology. The mass line means, "All for the people and all depends on the people. From the people and to the people". It sets up a political ideal in order to win the support of the people and consolidate the power of the CCP. Confucius once said, "Water that floats the boat can also sink it." This metaphor describes the power relationship between a ruler and his subjects, and that the subjects can be both supportive and destructive. This water-boat metaphor is frequently employed by CCP to call attention to the danger of losing the corroboration of the people. Consequently, the relationship between the people and the child characters often takes up an important part of the films. In terms of the visual and the narrative, the films show that the protagonists come from the people, live with the people, and work with the people, painting a picture of harmonious coexistence between the two. Long shots are often employed to show the communist soldiers mingling with peasants in plain clothing: they harvest crops together, they walk around in groups, and they work together to defeat the enemy. In terms of narrative, when the young protagonists are in danger, villagers sacrifice themselves to help. In *Red Children*, when Su is about to be captured, a villager sacrifices his life to save him. When Zhang Ga is wounded, a family from the same village helps him recover. After Dongzi's mother dies, Grandpa Song takes him in and looks out for him when he is in trouble.

Standard Periodical Directory Publisher ID# 480178658
ISSN: ISSN 2770-873X
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However, representing the devotion of the Party to the people is no less important than aggrandizing the allegiance of the people. The principle of Serve the People became the ideological foundation of the Party after the death of Chang Szu-teh in 1944. When Chang died while making charcoal, Mao Zedong extolled his sacrifice, gave the speech "Serve the People" at his funeral, and compared his death to Mount Tai; "To die for the people is weightier than Mount Tai, but to work for the fascists and die for the exploiters and oppressors is lighter than a feather. Comrade Chang Szu-teh died for the people, and his death is indeed weightier than Mount Tai" (Mao). Rebecca E. Karl in her article, after examining the origin and the development of "serve the people", concludes, "It names a requirement for pure selflessness and individual sacrifice, ideally through death, for the already constituted revolutionary collective" (247). As altruism was promoted fervently, individuals started to disappear into one big faceless group named "the people". Confirming such a phenomenon, Chinese contemporary writer Zhang Kangkang recalls the time period when she was sent off to the Great Northern Wilderness, "Lao San Jie (Junior and senior high school graduates of 1966-1968) don't say 'I" but always 'we' and 'ours', because during that time there was no 'I' but only 'we'. We lacked individuality but worshipped the collective spirit" (1).

The injunction of "serve the people" was included in the training of young political activists. The lesson for the child audience is that if the young character does not realize the primacy of the people over the individual, he should learn the lesson through trials. Only then will he become a true successor of the revolution. The film *Zhang Ga the Soldier Boy* specifically discusses this issue. Like many child characters in literary works and films during the time, Zhang Ga is a flawed character: although he desires to join the army, he is self-centered. Through the teaching of the Red Army Captain Wu, Zhang Ga finally learns his lesson and changes his attitude towards others.

C. The Surrogate Parent

Although Mao upheld the principle of the mass line, it does not necessarily mean he fully trusted the masses. In many of his writings he presented Party leadership as the solution. Accordingly, there appeared in propaganda the Party as the parents who not only pass on genes but also nurture, teach, and train the next generation.

Sobriquets like Grandpa Lenin, Uncle Stalin, Grandpa Mao, and Grandpa Xi are meant to produce an immediate intimacy between Party leaders and children to create the illusion that they are members of one family, bonded by blood. Such a practice can be traced back to Lenin in the 1920s when political propaganda tried to build a leader cult among children in the Soviet Union. Even in today's China, President Xi is often seen in pictures surrounded by children in close physical contact to display affection and intimacy. These photographs show President Xi having conversations with children, planting trees with them, and practicing calligraphy together, like an affectionate grandpa. Noting the legacy of creating the image of an approachable grandpa figure, an

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article states, "Targeted at children, the moniker of "Grandpa Xi" is part of the ongoing strategy towards creating a personality cult in China" (Chen and Lau).

Invoking the image of a male senior family member such as grandpa and uncle means more in Chinese cultural contexts because of the long patriarchal tradition and the tenet of filial piety. It makes the leaders not only approachable or accessible, but revered and awed. Filial piety can be applied to family members as well as the state and entails obligations in young ones to senior members, such as unconditionally obeying parental decisions and always displaying respect to senior members. With emphasis on avoiding conflicts among people different in age or social status, filial piety is also a useful tool of rulers to avoid social conflicts and placing the state in good order (Hsieh 57).

Besides representing itself as senior family members to cultivate intimacy, respect and obedience, the CCP has also assumed the role of surrogate parents. Such a parent-child metaphor is a strategy used to subjugate audiences to the role of sons and daughters. It is not surprising that in all four films, characters' parents are either killed or physically absent. In addition to making space for the Party to come into the lives of the protagonists as a surrogate parent, such a narrative design can also be viewed as "speaking bitterness" (*suku*), a customary narrative strategy that involves sharing a bitter story with the goal of mobilizing people. Explaining how the CCP successfully employed bitter narratives to tap into audience emotions and build hostility as well as solidarity, Jeffrey Javed concludes, "Its principal purpose was to leverage morality and emotion to inculcate in the populace new mass identities that accorded with the Party-state's ideology of class struggle" (257). The four films begin with the bitterness of motherless children. Hai Wa in *The Letter with Feathers*, Su Bao in *Red Children*, and Zhang Ga in *Zhang Ga the Soldier Boy* are motherless. Zhang Ga has his grandma at the beginning, but she is killed. The mother of Dongzi in *Sparkling Red Star* is killed in the middle of the film. What makes the situation worse is that when maternal figures are gone, the fathers are always away in the army or otherwise absent, leaving the child characters alone and parentless. Hai Wa is sent to deliver the letter by himself while his father stays behind. Su Bao's father leads troops into the mountains. Zhang Ga is an orphan. Dongzi's father leaves for the army while his mother is killed.

In the place of the biological parents is the Party that takes care of the children. In *Sparkling Red Star* when Dongzi's mother is killed, he returns to the base. As he sleeps in bed, Captain Wu sits next to a candle making a coat for him. This image invokes a Chinese classical poem "A Traveler's Song" by Meng Jiao from the Tang Dynasty. Presenting a touching relationship between a loving mother and her grateful son, the verse describes vividly how a mother carefully sews a garment in a hurry for her wayward son. In the film, Captain Wu is the loving mother who sews for the son, Dongzi. The visual metaphor cleverly borrows the image from the classical poem to imply the relationship between the Party and the boy to reinforce the nurturing image of the Party. Furthermore, as an embodiment of the CCP, Captain Wu is also Dongzi's

Standard Periodical Directory Publisher ID# 480178658
ISSN: ISSN 2770-873X
OCLC Number: 1286882178

mentor. He is responsible for training Dongzi as a soldier and decides when is the right time for him to take on more dangerous tasks. When Grandpa Song shows his concerns, Wu persuades him by quoting Mao's words about learning theories through applying them in real life.

D. Boy Soldiers

When Mao Zedong said, "Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun", he probably did not have children in mind. But the socialist propaganda of the time seemed to encourage the image of Red children armed with guns. Mixing violence with innocence, images of children during Mao's time were often in conflict with each other. On one hand, children's music such as "Song of Happiness" (*wa ha ha*) published in *Children's Music* in 1956 drew an idyllic picture by comparing the country to a big garden and children to delicate flowers. On the other hand, all four films discussed here construct children as little soldiers who are capable of deadly conduct: every child character kills, or at least helps with killing. The line between children and adults is again blurred, returning to pre-20th Century representations that did little to distinguish the two. Many scholars express concern over this. For instance, Mary Ann Farquhar notes that children's literature in the Maoist era failed to distinguish children from adults, which goes directly against Lu Xun's concept of children's literature (179). Also, Orna Naftali notices how state propaganda at the time celebrated aggressive children, praising and encouraging the combatant qualities of child-soldiers (90). Another article notes that most of the child-based films produced after 1949 "used adults as models for children, or made children believe themselves to be adults" (D. Li 48-49). However, some scholars tend to defend it by arguing that it was a unique historical time that called for special measures. For instance, in response to the criticism of the violence in Chinese children's war films, a professor from Renmin University agrees that children's movies were politicized, adultized and disciplined, but adds that "The behaviors or achievements of these characters surpass those of many adult heroes" (T. Chen 5).

Indeed, the point of their adventures is to bring about the demise of the enemy. Killing the enemy is encouraged and praised. These films conclude with the defeat of enemies, the protagonists' progress in their relationships with the Party, and the success of the army and the Party. Hai Wa's letter leads to a military operation that kills the enemies in a bunker. Su Bao and his friends blow up the enemies without help from adults. Zhang Ga sets the enemy bunker on fire and burns everyone inside. Dongzi pours oil on the landlord and sets him on fire while he is asleep in bed. As the landlord falls from bed, Dongzi finishes him with a machete. However, all film directors make sure the killings take place off screen. Closeups of angry faces and sound effects bridge the gap between the violence of the story and what is shown on screen.

Standard Periodical Directory Publisher ID# 480178658
ISSN: ISSN 2770-873X
OCLC Number: 1286882178

In addition, the message of molding boys into good soldiers was delivered successfully through upbeat songs, a special form of literature that efficiently spread socialist ideologies and values among child audiences. The theme songs of these films were broadcast in villages throughout China and were sung in classrooms and public gatherings. Usually, songs popular in the Communist areas were about land reforms, mothers, fathers, sisters, and brothers being wronged. The Communist Youth League is inserted into the film *Red Children* a few times to celebrate revolutionary spirits and heroic victory. The song is performed by a children's choir: "Quickly unite. Be always prepared. Take up swords and guns and join the Red Army. Overthrow the warlords and the landlords to protect the Soviet." Another song that is popular even up to today is the theme song from *Sparkling Red Star*, performed in a similar manner: "Follow Chairman Mao and follow the Party". Focusing on themes of taking up arms, killing enemies, abiding by Maoist teaching, and the Party, these songs restate and reinforce the perspective of the CCP in the wars.

To understand the cinematic celebration of boy soldiers was a deliberate political move, it is important to bring into the picture China's deteriorating relationship with the Soviet Union at that time. Conflicts between the two countries had started to escalate since the 1950s. In the mid-1950s after Stalin's death, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev adopted a more lenient and inclusive attitude towards Western culture and was more tolerant towards artistic expression. Between 1954 and 1968, Soviet cinema experienced a "thaw" and a new wave and rejoined the international cinema community. Soviet film director Grigori Chukhrai, whose film *Ballad of a Soldier* (1959) won prizes at Cannes, criticized Chinese filmmakers for dogmatism and lack of emotion; "Chinese films are the specimen of dogmatism and anti-art way of thinking" (Chukhrai 61). Feeling humiliated and betrayed, the CCP sought reprisal. Chinese literary critic Zhang Guangnian as well as Chen Mo's article titled "The Poisonous Weeds on the Screen - Commenting on the Three Films of Grigori Chukhrai" both denounced the Soviet New Wave and condemned the film director for reducing Soviet cinema to bourgeois art and ideology (Hong 9).

Consequently, in response to *Ivan's Childhood* by Andrei Tarkovsky, the CCP decided to make a film opposite to Tarkovsky's in almost every respect except the main theme—child-soldiers' experience of war. In Tarkovsky's story, Ivan Bondarev (Nikolai Burlyayev) is a 12-year-old Russian boy who, in order to avenge his mother who dies in the war, volunteers to spy for the Soviet Union and is captured, tortured, and finally killed by the Germans. The film divorces itself from Soviet propaganda and paints a bleak picture of the war while focusing on human nature, individual perspective, and feelings rather than depicting heroes or class struggles. In contrast, *Zhang Ga the Soldier Boy* is "a children's war comedy with positive thinking and bright and delightful style" (Han 112). Ivan suffers great pain, yet the Chinese film does not dwell on the pain of loss but quickly moves on to action for revenge. Tarkovsky's film ends in Ivan's tragic death as he is executed by the Germans, while Zhang Ga successfully avenges his grandma. Unlike the officials in Tarkovsky's film who attempt to talk the boy out of

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scouting behind the enemy line, the Chinese captain praises Zhang Ga for his bravery and cleverness in killing the enemy.

III. Conclusion

The discourse on representations of children in wars often focuses on children as war victims but tends to ignore their representation as active participants in wars, or that children have been exploited as instruments of war in many regions around the world. In contrast to the innocent and naïve child victims who appear in war films that criticize the cruelty of war, children in Maoist cinema were portrayed as courageous fighters, shrewd messengers, and spies who fought like adults in war. Through the analysis of the most popular children's war films during the Maoist era, *The Letter with Feathers*, *Red Children*, *Zhang Ga the Soldier Boy*, and *Sparkling Red Star*, this paper demonstrates that, to be a child role model in the era of Mao, one had to be a political activist with a revolutionary family background. Furthermore, he had to always cling to the Party's teaching, align himself with the Party's principles, and have the motivation and courage to kill.

In conclusion, children's war films in the Maoist era are not so much about children in real life as what the leadership imagined and desired them to be. Years after the wars, the government persisted in promoting ideas of class struggle and revolution among children and propaganda films reduced child characters into a singular stereotype. In the early 1900s, long before the founding of the Communist Party of China, Lu Xun's "Diary of a Madman" pleaded, "Save the children," in the hope that children would remain innocent and be spared from the cannibalism that was widely practiced among the adults in the Iron House, referring to the feudal society of China. Through the narrator/madman, the author advocated for a more humanistic and individualistic world in place of the old tradition of Confucianism. However, Lu Xun's plea for the children has continually gone unheeded. Maoist cinematic representations of Red children neither distinguished children as individuals from adults nor spared them from participating in wartime killing. The consumption of such an image of children as part of Red Classics waned as China kick-started economic reforms in the 1980s, but soon resumed as Chinese main melody films began to dominate the screen from the 1990s.

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