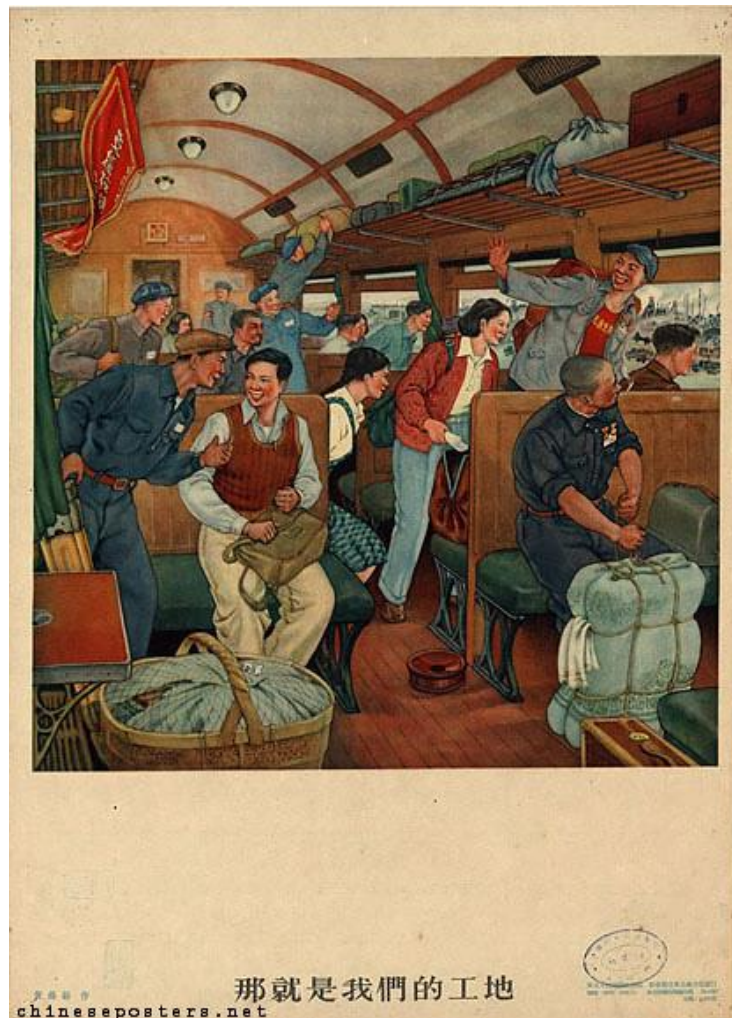


China Research Seminar Series (Lent 2021)
FAMES, University of Cambridge

Not Dreaming and Other Techniques of the Body

Trains, Technology and Nation in Socialist Cinema
(plus extra bonus material)

Dr Nathaniel Isaacson
(North Carolina State University)



5pm, 27 January, 2021 (Wednesday) via Zoom (pre-registration required)

Please register in advance for this seminar:

<https://zoom.us/meeting/register/tJIpfuCrjqkoG93C7GcNimOsyMSEBjbVbY2M>

After registering, you will receive a confirmation email containing information about joining the meeting.

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Abstract

This seminar examines filmic representations of trains in the PRC from 1949 to 1976, as a figure for modernization and the formation of a national body. Within these narratives, I examine how PRC cultural production focused on “citizen science,” how the train was used as a metaphor for the formation of a national body, and how these works depicted the formation of a national body as a form of bodily discipline.

During the 1960s in the PRC, “science” shifted from a rationalized, bureaucratic endeavor focused on understanding natural phenomena through experimental models to a grassroots endeavor aimed at the resolution of pragmatic issues. Mid-century Chinese depictions of science valorized amateur production and dissemination of scientific knowledge, and depictions of trains, railroads and the lives of their passengers were no exception. These narratives also focus on the construction of what I term “quotidian utopias” – utopian spaces carved out in the contemporary moment through a communal investment in mutual sacrifice. This space becomes a metaphor for industrial and social progress, represented by the broad swaths of working class proletarian passengers. Key among the laboring masses aboard the train are the train conductors, attendants, and rail workers. These workers are often depicted as learning new, Maussian “techniques of the body” in service of their duties maintaining the trains and the social welfare of the passengers. Often, contributing to the health of the train as nation is figured as necessitating the sacrifice of the individual – through losing sleep, or worse.

Speaker

Nathaniel Isaacson is an Associate Professor of Modern Chinese Literature in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature at North Carolina State University. His research interests include the history of Chinese science and science fiction, Chinese cinema, cultural studies, and literary translation. Nathaniel has published articles in the *Oxford Handbook of Modern Chinese Literatures*, and journals including *Osiris* and *Science Fiction Studies*. He has also published translations of non-fiction, poetry and fiction in the translation journals *Renditions*, *Pathlight*, *Science Fiction Studies*, and *Chinese Literature Today*. His book, *Celestial Empire: the Emergence of Chinese Science Fiction* (2017), examines the emergence of science fiction in late-Qing China. A number of recent translations of sci-fi author Han Song were included in the volume *Exploring Dark Fiction #5: A Primer to Han Song* (2020).