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ABSTRACT

The Rise of Red Police: Chinese Policemen in Maoist Movies, 1949-1966

Haocheng Wang, Washington University in St. Louis

From the 1949 transfer of power to the 1966 outbreak of the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese Party-state commissioned multiple movies whose protagonists were police officers. Although having become quite sophisticated and capable of simultaneously educating and entertaining the audience by the eve of the Cultural Revolution, these movies were never free of criticism. A consensus of sorts, nevertheless, was eventually reached via multiple compromises. All sides agreed that PRC police ought to possess a long list of characteristics, such as a morally upstanding lifestyle, a strong work ethic, and a delicate balance between loyalty to the party-state and devotion to the people (renmin), or the masses (qunzhong), on the one hand, and professional expertise on the other.

These values were framed as quintessentially socialist virtues and deployed to exalt police characters as heroic builders and defenders of a fledgling, unified Communist state. Comparing them with the official visions and popular depictions of their Republican predecessors, however, reveals a series of resemblances with their pre-1949 counterparts. Instead of proposing a brand-new policing vision, cinematic representations of socialist police fused two distinct pre-1949 policing models in Beijing and Shanghai. Both groups prided themselves on moral integrity, neighborhood knowledge, political loyalties, and a set of professional qualifications based on rationality, science, and technology. By assuming a wide array of responsibilities and serving as mediators between the state and the local community, both strived to improve the welfare of the neighborhoods under their charge and strengthened a powerful, centralized state.