

The Influence of Soviet Films on Chinese Films in the 17-Year Period: An Analysis of the Film *Zhang Ga the Soldier Boy*

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Abstract: This paper presents a case study of the film *Zhang Ga the Soldier Boy*, focusing on how films released during the 17-year period are influenced by the theory of Soviet montage. A comparative analysis was carried out on four elements of the movie: Close-up shots, low/high-angle shots, shots of the Masses, and three montages of Pudovkin (metaphorical montage, contrast montage, and repeating montage). By comparing the similar social backgrounds and film techniques between Chinese and Soviet films, this paper aims to provide references for future film studies, especially the relationship between montage and politics.

Keywords: Montage; Film studies; 17-year period

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1. Introduction

The historical development of Chinese films after the founding of New China can be understood into three stages: 17-year films, Cultural Revolution films, and the New Era films. The 17-year films refer to the period from the founding of New China to the Cultural Revolution (1949–1966). In this period, the objective of Chinese films was to spread ideologies and they were deeply influenced by Soviet films. Many great films were produced during this period, such as *Lin Jia Pu Zi*, *Zhang Ga the Soldier Boy*, *Zhao Yiman*, etc.

The Soviet montage plays a significant role in Soviet-film-inspired Chinese movies. Soviet montage refers to the period from the 1920s to the 1930s. There were some filmmakers who were active in this period and made contributions to montage theory and practice, with Sergei Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov, Lev Kuleshov, and Wosevorod Pudovkin being the most significant ones. The origin of Soviet montage is related to a political event. The October Revolution in 1917 opened up a new era for artistic creation. Besides, Mayakovsky's futuristic poetry, Kandinsky's futuristic painting, and Meyerhold's naturalistic drama set off a breakthrough in the history of arts, which also stimulated these filmmakers. In addition, the new Soviet government realized that films were a powerful tool for propaganda. As a result, films got the attention of the government, and many

documentaries, newsreels, and story films started coming out. On August 27, 1919, Lenin signed a treaty to centralize the Russian film industry. In the same year, Soviet film academies were established to train more filmmakers. The first researcher in this period was Lev Kuleshov. After the establishment of Soviet state film academies, he set up a studio and attracted a large number of talented artists: Hoxhlova, Pudovkin, Barnett, etc. In this studio, he completed the famous experiment.

In addition, Pudovkin who was a student of Kuleshov, was another Soviet montage theorist. He divided montages into five types and analyzed them in detail. Eisenstein was regarded as the most influential person in the Soviet montage by many scholars. He also divided montage into five types: metric montage, rhythmic montage, tonal montage, overtone montage, and intellectual montage. When Eisenstein talked about montage of attraction, he said that an attraction is any aggressive aspect of the theatre; that is, any element of the theatre that subjects the spectator to a sensual or psychological impact, experimentally regulated and mathematically calculated to produce in him certain emotional shocks which, when placed in their proper sequence within the totality of the production, become the only means that enable the spectator to perceive the ideological side of what is being demonstrated—the ultimate ideological conclusion ^[1]

The reason why Chinese films in the late 1940s could be influenced by the film theory from the Soviet Union is that China and the Soviet Union had similar national conditions at that time. In the 1940s, New China was just founded, so Chinese films of that period were also serving the proletarian revolution and politics. In short, as Chinese films were based on the same Marxist Leninist ideology, they share many similarities with films of the Soviet Union, which is an important reason that why Soviet films influenced Chinese films during the 17-year period.

Under this influence, Chinese filmmakers developed their own understanding of montage based on Soviet montage theory. For example, Chen ^[2] holds the view that montage is a unique formation method of film composition and insists that montage broke the limitation of traditional space and time and created a new era and space for filmmaking.

However, 17-year films did not exactly copy the montage theory from the Soviet Union. The part where Soviet montage overemphasized the decisive role of content and denied the relative independence of art form, was not adopted by Chinese film theorists.

All in all, Chinese seventeen-year films have learned from the Soviet montage theory in a selective way. In the following sections, the film *Zhang Ga the Soldier Boy* will be used as an example to analyze the reflection of the Soviet montage theory in Chinese 17-year films. During the 17 years, there were a lot of films about the Anti-Japanese War and *Zhang Ga the Soldier Boy* is a typical example of that.

Zhang Ga the Soldier Boy is a movie produced by Beijing Film Studio in 1963. It came out in the later stage of the 17-year period. The directors are Cui Wei and Ouyang Hongying. The film was adapted from Xu Guangyao's novel, telling the story of how a teenager, Zhang Ga, became a veritable Eighth Route army under the guidance of other adult soldiers.

In this special historical period, many movie protagonists had similar experiences with Zhang Ga, they became mature after and experiencing and suffering from the war. First of all, from a historical perspective, films from the early days of the founding of the People's Republic of China mostly extol revolutionary heroism to inspire and educate the public. As a result, there were many close-up shots in the film to show the characters' heroism. Besides, these films often put the protagonist in a tough situation, showing how bravely the protagonist fights with the enemy, in order to express the revolutionary heroism spirit with the final victory.

2. Close-up shots in *Zhang Ga the Soldier Boy*

Close-up shots are an effective way to display the character's expression, making the film more engaging. Hong^[3] argues that all kinds of art like film and theatrical shows are mostly similar, and close-up shots are the only thing that distinguishes films from theatrical shows. The expressiveness of close-up shots is something that theatrical shows do not have. They can directly display the character's inner world from his/her facial expressions.

The use of close-up shots was determined by the political agenda behind the movie. In other words, these shots had a political function. There are six close-up shot pictures picked from *Zhang Ga the Soldier Boy*.

Figure 1 is from the very beginning of the film. It is the first shot of Zhang Ga. His face is worried. It is easy for the audience to tell that he saw something happening from his face. **Figure 2** is a shot for his sister, and it is a happy face, full of the desire to win the war. **Figures 3 & 4** are close-shots of Zhang Ga and another Eighth Route army. He was telling Zhang Ga about his own experience in the war. In this shot, it is clear that Zhang Ga is really into the story and the other person's face is full of hatred for the Japanese enemy and determination to win. **Figure 5** is a picture of Zhang Ga's grandmother, she was caught by a Japanese enemy and they were going to kill her, but this close-up shot clearly showed that she was not afraid of death at all. From her face, we can tell that she has already made up her mind to fight the Japanese enemy to the end of her life. **Figure 6** is the end of the film, we can see two happy faces of Zhang Ga and his peer. The close-up shot showed that they had already seen the hope of victory.

All of these shots showed the fighting spirit of the Chinese people in facing Japanese invaders. The film stimulated the audiences' patriotic emotions through these shots and techniques.

3. Low/High-angle shots

Secondly, another obvious characteristic of this kind of film is the low/high-angle shots. This kind of technique is also common in Soviet movies, so many scholars called these "the Soviet shots."

Figures 7 & 8 are low-angle shots of Zhang Ga and the other Eighth Route army. **Figure 9** is a high-angle shot of the Japanese enemy. With the two opposite camera angles, the director made the image of Zhang Ga and the other Eighth Route army look brave and strong while the Japanese enemy look evil and ugly. Hong^[4] believes that this is not only about different shooting angles but also the opposition of two different ideologies.

Figures 10–12 are low-angle shots of Zhang Ga and his grandmother. **Figure 10** is a combination of a close-up shot and a low-angle shot, which portrays Zhang Ga's courage and emotions at the time. The grandmother in **Figure 11** and Zhang Ga in **Figure 12** have a similar expression. The desire and determination to win are clearly shown on both of their faces. Many films of that time had similar faces like *Zhao Yiman* (1950) and *Dong Cuirui* (1955).

4. Shots of the Masses

Thirdly, images of the masses were also a major feature of 17-year films which were inspired by Marx's historical view: He believed that the masses are the creators of history. Lenin also pointed out that the masses appear as active creators of the new society as they did during the revolution. **Figures 13–16** of the shots of the masses from *Zhang Ga the Soldier Boy*. There were many similar scenes in the Soviet film *The Battleship Potemkin* (**Figures 17–20**).

5. Metaphorical Montage, Contrast Montage & Repeating Montage

Lastly, there are many shots taken based on the Soviet montage theory. Especially Pudovkin's montage theory. In Figures 21 & 22, the first example illustrates the use of Metaphorical montage. It depicts Zhang Ga's reflection on the water in the lake, connecting him in reality with the heroic reflection, representing the imagination. This montage breaks the constraints of time and space, metaphorically suggesting that the teenager will grow stronger and become a leading force against the Japanese enemy. Thus, these shots carry a significant political message.



Metaphorical montage is evident in these two pictures as well. Figure 23 depicts a group of Eighth Route Army soldiers walking in darkness, while Figure 24 shows many soldiers on boats heading toward the rising sun in the morning. The sun serves as a clear symbol of hope and victory. **Figures 23 & 24** convey the message that victory ultimately belongs to the Chinese people, despite experiencing darkness before achieving success.

In *The Battleship Potemkin*, there are three shots of a lion which looks irrelevant to the theme but this represents the awakening of the masses (**Figures 25–27**). **Figures 28–31** are typical examples of contrast montages showing the different reactions of different characters. In **Figure 28**, a Japanese soldier is hitting an Chinese old lady, **Figures 29 & 30** show the reaction of other Chinese people, in which they are shocked. On the contrary, **Figure 31** shows the delight of the other Japanese soldier with an evil smile on his face. The contrast montage is a very useful skill to make the enemy look worse by contrasting them with Chinese citizens.

Figures 32 & 33 provide another example of contrast montage. In Figure 32, Zhang Ga is depicted against a clean and pure background, reflecting the innocence and purity of his personality. However, in **Figure 33**, he is confronted by a large number of Japanese enemies, creating a stark contrast. This montage highlights the significant strength disparity between our army and the Japanese enemy. Despite lacking advanced weapons, their determination is what ultimately leads them to victory. Through this use of montage, the director aims to inspire patriotism among the audience.

Figures 34–37 utilize repeating montage. The scene of Baiyang Lake is repeated multiple times to emphasize that this beautiful landscape is their home, making the invasion by the Japanese enemy all the more abhorrent.

6. Table of figures

Figure	Screenshot	Description
1		Close-up shot of Zhang Timestamp: 0:16
2		Close-up shot of Zhang's sister Timestamp: 04:39



Close-up shot of Zhang
Timestamp: 12:54



Close-up shot of another Chinese
Timestamp: 12:59



Close-up shot of Zhang's grandmother
Timestamp: 20:35



Close-up of Zhang and his partner
Timestamp: 1:41:04



Low-angle shot of Zhang
Timestamp: 10:29



Low-angle shot of Zhang and his partner
Timestamp: 13:38



High-angle shot Timestamp: 14:44



Low-angle shot
Timestamp: 17:35



Low-angle shot of Zhang's grandmother
Timestamp: 17:42



Low-angle shot of Zhang
Timestamp: 42:51



Shot of the Mass
Timestamp: 17:55



Shot of the Mass
Timestamp: 1:36:22



Shot of the Mass
Timestamp: 1:36:31



Shot of the Mass
Timestamp: 1:36:38



Shot of the Mass in *The Battleship Potemkin*
Timestamp: 36:29



Shot of the Mass in *The Battleship Potemkin*
Timestamp: 37:39



Shot of the Mass in *The Battleship Potemkin*
Timestamp: 40:39



Shot of the Mass in *The Battleship Potemkin*
Timestamp: 47:03



Zhang's reflection in the river
Timestamp: 1:07:56



Zhang in reality
Timestamp: 1:08:08



Soldiers walking towards the sun
Timestamp: 37:29



Soldiers heading toward the sun
Timestamp: 37:49



Sleeping lion in *The Battleship Potemkin*
Timestamp: 54:58



The lion is waking up
Timestamp: 54:59



The lion wakes up
Timestamp: 55:00

28



Japanese soldier hitting a Chinese lady
Timestamp: 20:39

29



The facial expression of the Chinese lady
Timestamp: 20:40

30



Facial expression of Zhang
Timestamp: 20:41

31



The facial expression of the Japanese soldier
Timestamp: 20:43

32



Zhang in the lake
Timestamp: 24:52



A group of Japanese soldiers
Timestamp: 25:09



Baiyang Lake
Timestamp: 0:31



Sunrise at Baiyang Lake
Timestamp: 2:28



Chinese people and Baiyang Lake
Timestamp: 1:08:54



View of Baiyang Lake
Timestamp: 1:13:09

Source: https://www.iqiyi.com/v_2da236jjtac.html?vfm=2008_aldbd&fv=p_02_01

7. Conclusion

Films have the power to reflect the history and politics of a particular period. Whether they are Soviet films or Chinese films from the 17-year period, it's essential to consider the unique historical context of the time.

This essay compares the similar political backgrounds of China and the Soviet Union and analyzes the parallel shooting techniques in Chinese and Soviet films, using the example of *Zhang Ga the Soldier Boy*. It confirms the influence of the political environment on the development of film and underscores the importance of Chinese films learning from the Soviet Union. Additionally, it emphasizes the necessity for films to serve the prevailing ideology of the time. Ultimately, this paper aims to contribute to the study of the relationship between montage and politics in the future.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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