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REVOLUTIONARY ECHOES: RADIOS AND LOUDSPEAKERS IN THE MAO ERA

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Providing a sound track to a previously silent historiography, this article excavates a media history of the wireless and wired soundscape in Mao-era China. In 1949, China had only about one million radio sets, concentrated in urban “bourgeois” homes, but the Communist Party quickly expanded its listening public through a “radio reception network” and by the 1970s had constructed a wired broadcasting infrastructure with more than 100 million loudspeakers that revolutionized time and space, politics and everyday life. Drawing on archives, gazetteers, memoirs, and oral histories, this article examines the state-sponsored development of radio broadcasting as well as grassroots listening experiences and practices. I argue that radios and loudspeakers—rather than entralling the nation with the party’s monotonous voice—contributed to the Chinese revolution in heterogeneous ways, from political communication to labor mobilization, from propaganda to surveillance, from enhancing the Mao cult to engendering violence and terror.

KEYWORDS: broadcasting, Cultural Revolution, loudspeakers, Mao era, propaganda, radio

The Chinese revolution was a media revolution. From the 1950s to the 1970s, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) built up a vast film-screening and radio-listening network with more than 100,000 film-projection units and nearly 100 million loudspeakers.¹ How did such media infrastructure extend the reach of the state to the most remote corners of the land? How did technologically mediated sights and sounds help mobilize hundreds of millions at Chairman Mao’s beck and call? Were

1 Li Daoxin, “Xin zhongguo dianying faxing faying wang: yige lishi de kaocha” [Film distribution and exhibition network of new China: a historical perspective], *Journal of Communication University of Zhejiang*, March 2017, 2–19; Dangdai Zhongguo de guangbo dianshi ji bu [Contemporary Chinese Radio and Television Editorial Board], ed., *Zhongguo de youxian guangbo* [China’s wired broadcasting] (Beijing: Beijing guangbo xueyuan chubanshe, 1988), 201.

audiences modernized or “tribalized,”² enlightened or “brainwashed,” subjugated or resistant? What impact did propaganda media have on their bodies, minds, and senses, on their beliefs, actions, and memories?

With these broader questions in mind, this paper explores the history of the Mao era’s mediated soundscape with a focus on radios and loudspeakers. In 1949, China had only about one million radio sets, concentrated in the homes of the “bourgeoisie” in coastal cities, but the Chinese Communist Party quickly expanded its “radio reception network” through practices such as organized mass listening and “rooftop broadcasting.” From the mid-1950s to the late 1970s, the development of a wired broadcasting network gave rise to ubiquitous loudspeakers that revolutionized the urban and rural soundscape, redefining time and space, political mobilization, and everyday life. Drawing on official sources from archives to radio gazetteers as well as on ethnographies, memoirs, and interviews, this paper first traces the infrastructural expansion and control of audio broadcasting technologies and networks throughout the socialist period and then focuses on the uses and experiences of loudspeakers during the Cultural Revolution decade (1966–1976).

Whereas socialist visual culture has received much scholarly attention over the last two decades,³ auditory culture remains a new frontier in the study of Mao’s China. Recent works shed light on the evolving styles, meanings, and legacies of “red” music.⁴ Yet most China scholars studying sound have made only passing mention of its mediating technologies.⁵ There has been hardly any English-language scholarship on the history of radio in the People’s Republic of China,⁶ so my first goal here is to provide a “sound track to a previously silent historiography.”⁷

While much work waits to be done on radio stations and programming, I shall limit the scope of this article to excavating a complex media history of the wireless and wired

2 In 1964 Marshall McLuhan famously called radio a “tribal drum” to suggest its ensnarement of a rapt audience. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: Routledge, 1964), 300.

3 Some recent monographs covering Maoist visual culture include Xiaobing Tang, *Visual Culture in Contemporary China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), Laikwan Pang, *The Art of Cloning: Creative Production during China’s Cultural Revolution* (New York: Verso Books, 2017), and Denise Y. Ho, *Curating Revolution: Politics on Display in Mao’s China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

4 Paul Clark, Laikwan Pang, and Tsan-Huang Tsai, eds., *Listening to China’s Cultural Revolution* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016). See also Barbara Mittler, *Dangerous Tunes: The Politics of Chinese Music in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the People’s Republic of China Since 1949* (Otto Harrassowitz Verlag, 1997); Barbara Mittler, *A Continuous Revolution: Making Sense of Cultural Revolution Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), pt. 1, “Ears”; Richard Kraus, *Pianos and Politics in China: Middle-Class Ambitions and the Struggle over Western Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press on Demand, 1989).

5 Two exceptional articles that have paid attention to technologies of listening in the Mao era are: Andrew F. Jones, “Quotation Songs: Portable Media and the Maoist Pop Song” in *The Little Red Book: A Global History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 43–60; Nicole Huang, “Listening to Films: Politics of the Auditory in 1970s China,” *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 7, no. 3 (2013): 187–206. Barbara Mittler also noted the ubiquity of the model works. Mittler, *Continuous Revolution*, 48–49.

6 Most English-language scholarship on radio broadcasting in China was published in the Cold War era, such as Hugh Howse, “The Use of Radio in China,” *China Quarterly* 2 (1960): 59–68.

7 I borrow this phrase from Emily Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America, 1900–1933* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 8.

soundscape in Mao's China. R. Murray Schafer first conceptualized the soundscape as a "sonic environment, the ever-present array of noises with which we all live,"⁸ whereas Emily Thompson defines the soundscape as "an auditory or aural landscape," at once "a physical environment and a way of perceiving that environment": "The physical aspects of a soundscape consist not only of the sounds themselves, but also the material objects that create, and sometimes destroy, those sounds. A soundscape's cultural aspects incorporate scientific and aesthetic ways of listening, a listener's relationship to their environment, and the social circumstances that dictate who gets to hear what."⁹ This article attends to both the physical and cultural aspects of a mediatised soundscape in Mao's China, but, whereas Thompson's work on "soundscapes of modernity" is rooted in discussions of early twentieth-century American capitalism, the electrification of the Chinese soundscape is intertwined with a socialist revolution and its waves of mass mobilization. Tracking the relationship between auditory technology and the Chinese revolution from the 1950s to the 1970s, I discuss CCP theories and practices of radio and the construction of a broadcasting infrastructure, as well as diverse experiences and memories of listening to radios and loudspeakers. Much as the CCP sought to harness radio as a propaganda mouthpiece—literally "throat and tongue" (*houshe* 喉舌)—the soundscape of the Mao era remained a battle zone between the governance *of* and *through* broadcasting and grassroots practices to evade and subvert such control. Instead of the party-state's monotonous voice emanating from a radio tower and enthralling the nation with its spell—a caricature of totalitarian propaganda at work—wireless and wired audio broadcasting contributed to the Chinese revolution in heterogeneous ways, from political communication to labor mobilization, from propaganda to surveillance, from enhancing the Mao cult to engendering violence and terror. Drawing comparisons to auditory cultures in other national contexts, I also suggest some uniquely "Maoist" ways of using radios and loudspeakers, including organized listening, rooftop broadcasting, and the linchpin of human agents—from radio receptionists to broadcasters—in the media infrastructure. Perhaps even more pervasive—as well as more ephemeral and subliminal—than visual propaganda like posters and films, broadcasting through radios and loudspeakers constituted a significant (yet now neglected) medium through which the Chinese people sensed, experienced, and remembered the Mao era.

FROM BOURGEOIS RADIO TO MASS BROADCASTING

Electric sound technologies—including the telephone, the phonograph, the radio, and sound cinema—were introduced to China from the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century and began to modernize the soundscapes of Chinese cities. In Republican Shanghai, for example, a new listening device, the gramophone, "was both a mechanical emblem of modernity and the principal engine whereby music became an object of private, individualized consumption."¹⁰ Not only was the

8 R. M. Schaefer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), cover text.

9 Thompson, *Soundscape of Modernity*, 1.

10 Andrew F. Jones, *Yellow Music: Media Culture and Colonial Modernity in the Chinese Jazz Age* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 55.

gramophone “marketed as an indispensable accoutrement of the modern home and a marker of petit bourgeois respectability,” but social spaces such as cinemas, “cafés, restaurants, and nightclubs were also fitted with gramophones or wireless radios as a stand-in for live musicians,” thereby giving rise to a “gramophone culture” in the modern metropolis, with its “radiophonic and cinematic byproducts.”¹¹ From 1923 to 1949, wireless radio culture also flourished in Shanghai, with up to 60 radio stations—more than the total number in the rest of China—broadcasting a cacophony of sounds ranging from traditional storytelling to American jazz, from lectures to commercials.¹² While the record industry was dominated by transnational capital in a colonial context, there were also incipient efforts to produce domestic radio sets and records, as well as amateur radio practices that “circulated knowledge of wireless technology” and produced “a broader culture of productive receptivity.”¹³ Moreover, while targeting the “feudal and colonial nature” of the popular sonic culture, leftist intellectuals and the underground CCP also used phonographs, radio, and sound cinema to mobilize collective resistance against Japanese and Western imperialism.¹⁴

In 1949, the CCP inherited the legacy of listening technologies from the Republican era but fundamentally revolutionized their deployment and content. This was especially true of radio, which, alongside victory parades, was the most timely medium through which the CCP announced their “liberation” of Chinese cities.¹⁵ While taking over or closing down radio stations of the old regime,¹⁶ the CCP also sought to expand the listening public for “People’s Radio Stations” (人民广播电台 *renmin guangbo diantai*) and to protect the airwaves from enemy infiltration. In 1950, the government estimated that there were a total of about one million radio sets nationwide, nearly all foreign brands, with about 350,000 in East China (mainly in Shanghai), 350,000 in the Northeast, 200,000 in the Beijing and Tianjin area, and only 100,000 in the rest of the country.¹⁷ Most existing radios belonged to urban, middle-class families of clerks and capitalists and to shops, with hardly any in the possession of workers and peasants.¹⁸ Yet the CCP took upon itself the task of revolutionizing radio’s class character from bourgeois domesticity to proletarian mobilization.

In 1950, the CCP tightened control over the sale of radio equipment and registered radio sets. In Shanghai, it was estimated that 40% of the quarter million radios had shortwave capacity and could receive Voice of America. In order to “cut off the enemy’s tongue so that it couldn’t spread rumors,” the Public Security Bureau planned to mobilize

11 Jones, *Yellow Music*, 54–57.

12 Zhenzhi Guo, “A Chronicle of Private Radio in Shanghai,” *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 30, no. 4 (1986): 379–92.

13 Weihong Bao, *Fierce Cinema: The Emergence of an Affective Medium in China, 1915–1945* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 93.

14 Jones, *Yellow Music*, 68–71.

15 In Heilongjiang Province, for example, the new government’s radio stations installed loudspeakers on major streets as early as 1947 and 1948. *Zhongguo de youxian guangbo*, 333.

16 Du Ying, “Shanghai guangbo diantaiye de jieguan yu gaizao” [The takeover and reform of the broadcasting industry in Shanghai], *Twenty-First Century Bimonthly* 115, no. 10 (2009): 65–74.

17 Mei Yi, “Woguo renmin guangbo shiye gaikuang” [Survey of our people’s broadcasting enterprise], *Renmin ribao* [People’s daily], April 25, 1950.

18 “Qudi duanbo shouyinji” [Banning shortwave radio], 1950, A22-2-9-3, Shanghai Municipal Archives.

800 radio technicians to physically disable shortwave on all the radio sets they could get their hands on. At the rate of seven radio sets a day per technician, this would have taken a whole month to finish. Meanwhile, Shanghai's propaganda department was to mobilize public sentiments against listening to Voice of America; trade unions and youth leagues were all supposed to persuade their constituents to submit to the registration and refitting of their radio sets.¹⁹ In practice, not everyone registered their radios. A number of radio owners I interviewed in Shanghai—most of them born in the 1940s and 1950s—recalled listening to shortwave stations as late as the 1960s and 1970s on radio sets from the Republican era that were never sent to government repair stations.²⁰

Between October 1952 and January 1954, the Shanghai People's Radio Station conducted an investigation of radio ownership and listening in the city, finding on average one radio set for every 10 workers vs. one radio set for every bourgeois family. Yet 75% of new radio buyers in 1954 were workers, whereas many bourgeois who owned radio sets stopped listening. An investigator who knocked on every door in an alleyway found a total of 214 radio sets among its 309 households, mostly clerks and small business owners who had purchased their sets prior to 1949. Nearly half of all radio sets malfunctioned. Some residents said that they weren't interested in listening, while some others didn't want to spend the money. Even those with functioning radios listened sparingly to save electricity.²¹ At the Shanghai 17th Cotton Factory, by contrast, each of the 99 radios among nearly 2,000 workers would be shared by five or six individuals. Since most workers came from the Subei area, they liked to listen to Jianghuai opera and enjoyed traditional storytelling and Shanghainese comedy programs. Though organized to listen to political speeches and news reports, many workers could not understand Mandarin or the abstruse vocabulary. After work, they were often busy with domestic chores and thus rarely listened to the radio for concentrated stretches of time.²²

Outside of metropolises like Shanghai, radio held special significance for the new regime's consolidation of power in this vast country. A 1950 government directive called for expanding the nationwide radio reception network and declared wireless broadcasting a most important propaganda tool given the nation's "inconvenient transportation, mostly illiterate population, and insufficient newspapers."²³ The Central People's Broadcasting Station (also known as China National Radio) also expounded on the utopian potentials of this revolutionary medium: "Not subject to the limits of space and the written word, radio's special character distinguishes it from press, film, and theatre. It is an excellent

19 "Qudi duanbo shouyinji."

20 This information is based on questionnaires I collected from various Shanghainese born in the 1940s and 1950s, to learn about their radio-listening memories, November 2016.

21 "Guanyu Shanghai shi shouyinji shuliang, changshi, he chiyou qingkuang de jiben guji" [Estimates of the number, types, and ownership of radio sets in Shanghai], B92-1-165, Shanghai Municipal Archives.

22 "Guanyu Shanghai shi shouyinji shuliang, changshi, he chiyou qingkuang de jiben guji."

23 Hu Qiaomu, "Zhongyang renmin zhengfu xinwen zongshu guanyu jianli guangbo shouyin wang de jue ding" [Decision to build a broadcast reception network by the news general office of the central people's government], in Xinwen gongzuoshe, ed., *Guangbo shouyin shouce* [Radio reception manual] (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 1950), 1–2.

weapon for large-scale propaganda, education, and agitation.”²⁴ A *People’s Daily* editorial in June 1950 proclaimed the arrival of a “wireless age” and called on “leaders at every level” to effectively make use of this “modern propaganda weapon.” Besides radio’s capability to address the illiterate masses, the editorial considered speed to be radio’s main advantage over print.²⁵ The editorial also discussed radio’s potential for mass education: “Instead of strenuously organizing classrooms ‘handicraft industry style’ for only tens and hundreds of people, radio stations can simultaneously teach tens of thousands, even millions of students at the same time.”²⁶ Radio’s orality, speed, and massive reach were thus considered uniquely suited to govern China’s vast territory, inadequate infrastructure, and uneducated populace.

Many early PRC theories and practices concerning radio were modeled after those of the Soviet Union, with frequent quotations of Lenin, who praised radio as “a newspaper without paper and without distances.”²⁷ *The Radio Reception Manual* (廣播收音手冊 *Guangbo shouyin shouce*), published in 1950, included mostly translations of Soviet articles on their wireless enterprise.²⁸ *Rural Wired Broadcasting Station* (農村有線廣播站 *Nongcun youxian guangbo zhan*), published in 1956, was a translation of a 1952 Soviet technical manual for setting up the basic infrastructure for wired broadcasting in the countryside.²⁹ Yet whereas Soviet leaders in the 1920s had emphasized scientific and technical development with economic investment, the 1950s blueprints for China’s radio network were much more concerned with the mobilization of listeners.³⁰ In the face of backward technologies and inadequate resources, China’s radio network had to be woven out of organized listening.

ORGANIZED LISTENING AND A RADIO RECEPTION NETWORK

Most Chinese local “People’s Radio Stations” in the early 1950s included programs targeting organized listeners.³¹ Beijing People’s Radio Station, for example, had “Workers’ Program, Youth Time, Women’s Garden, Children’s Program, Students’ Program, Soldiers’ Program, and Broadcasting to the Countryside in the Suburbs”

24 Zhongyang renmin guangbo diantai [Central people’s radio station], editorial, “Xunsu zai quanguo jianli guangbo shouyinwang” [Rapidly construct a nationwide radio reception network], April 20, 1950, in Xinwen gongzuoshe, *Guangbo shouyin shouce*, 10.

25 Editorial, “Geji lingdao jiguan yingdang youxiao di liyong wuxiandian guangbo” [All levels of leadership should effectively use wireless broadcasting], *Renmin ribao*, June 6, 1950, repr. in Xinwen gongzuoshe, *Guangbo shouyin shouce*, 6.

26 Xinwen gongzuoshe, *Guangbo shouyin shouce*, 5.

27 Stephen Lovell, “Broadcasting Bolshevik: The Radio Voice of Soviet Culture, 1920s–1950s,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 48, no. 1 (2013): 83.

28 Xinwen gongzuoshe, *Guangbo shouyin shouce*.

29 D.K. Slavnikov, *Nongcun youxian guangbozhan* [Rural wired broadcasting station], trans. Wang Mingde and Wu Weicong (Beijing: Renmin youdian chubanshe, 1956), originally published as D.K. Slavnikov, *Sel’skij radiouznel* [Rural radio] (Moscow: Gos. eñnerget. Izd., 1952).

30 Lovell, “Broadcasting Bolshevik.” See also Xinwen gongzuoshe, *Guangbo shouyin shouce*, 13–37.

31 Xinwen gongzuoshe, *Guangbo shouyin shouce*, 44.

from 1949 to 1953.³² Addressing different audience categories at different times changed the nature of radio programming from one of planned flow to one of discrete events. Raymond Williams theorized the “flow” as “the defining characteristic of broadcasting, simultaneously as a technology and as a cultural form,” whereby commercials during intervals between programs helped sustain audience interest and keep them from changing the station/channel.³³ With the elimination of advertisements and introduction of collective listening practices, radio in the early 1950s China was not meant as just a background “flow” of distracting sounds in the domestic sphere; rather, it demanded concentrated listeners to attend organized listening sessions as events, not unlike going to movies or rallies.

The apogee of organized listening, however, took the form of “broadcast rallies” (广播大会 *guangbo dahui*) in all major cities in the spring of 1951, with the Campaign to Suppress Counterrevolutionaries and mobilization for the Korean War. Every broadcast rally had one main site as the broadcast source and many satellite sites where audiences assembled to listen to the live broadcast.³⁴ In Chengdu, two broadcast rallies were held in April 1951, each time with 346 loudspeakers installed on streets, 484 listening stations set up in work units, schools, factories, and residential neighborhoods, and about 300,000 listeners. Speakers included a martyr’s daughter, an old man who had lost six family members to Japanese bombing, a student representative persecuted by the Guomindang, and exploited peasants from the suburbs. Amidst “tearful indictments,” the broadcast rally kept inserting telephone calls expressing support from workers, students, cadres, and residents.³⁵ After the rally against American imperialism, workers, entrepreneurs, and residents reportedly marched to the radio station with red flags, gongs, drums, and generous donations to the Korean war effort.³⁶

Even amidst mass campaigns, the party issued a cautionary note against broadcast rallies in 1951, noting that these “cost a great deal of effort” and “should not be used often to avoid mass fatigue.”³⁷ Nevertheless, broadcast rallies were revived during the Great Leap Forward: the Central People’s Broadcasting Station held 19 of them between March 1959 and May 1960, with several million listeners each time.³⁸ Many broadcast rallies took the form of “red flag competitions,” whereby leaders at the radio station would

32 Beijing renmin guangbo diantai [Beijing People’s Broadcasting Station], ed., *Beijing renmin guangbo diantai zhi: 1949–1993* [Beijing People’s Broadcasting Station gazetteer, 1949–1993] (Beijing: Beijing renmin guangbo diantai, 1999), 31.

33 Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (New York: Routledge, 1974), 86.

34 Xu Guangchun, ed., *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo guangbo dianshi jianshi 1949–2000* [Brief history of broadcasting and television in the People’s Republic of China 1949–2000] (Beijing: Zhongguo guangbo dianshi chubanshe, 2003), 55–56.

35 Sichuan sheng guangbo dianying dianshiju shizhiban, *Jianguo chuqi Sichuan, Xikang renmin guangbo* [People’s broadcasting in Sichuan and Xikang in the early People’s Republic] (Chengdu: Sichuan sheng guangbo dianying dianshi shizhiban, 2001), 11–13.

36 *Jianguo chuqi Sichuan, Xikang renmin guangbo*, 11–13; Beijing renmin guangbo diantai, *Beijing renmin guangbo diantai zhi*, 26–28.

37 *Dangdai Zhongguo de guangbo dianshi ji bu* [Contemporary Chinese Radio and Television Editorial Board], ed., *Zhongguo de guangbo jiemu* [China’s radio programs] (Beijing: Beijing guangbo xueyuan chubanshe, 1988), 17; Xu, *Guangbo dianshi jianshi*, 59.

38 Xu, *Guangbo dianshi jianshi*, 98–99.

state production tasks and goals while factories with organized listeners would call in to pledge ever higher production targets.³⁹ Radio reception in this case turned into a kind of collective performance of revolutionary ardor.

A more lasting and sustained form of organized listening than broadcast rallies was the development of a radio reception network sprawling into the countryside in the 1950s. By 1952, there were about 20,500 radio-reception stations nationwide, whose radio receptionists took radio sets to the countryside to organize rural listeners.⁴⁰ A short story published at the time gives us a glimpse of how this was supposed to work. Overcoming her frail physique, young and cheery radio receptionist Little Wang took to the road with a heavy load on her shoulder pole. While she dreamed of the day when Chinese peasants also owned radio sets like their Soviet counterparts, village children greeted her as the “singer of electric opera.” Upon arrival, she connected her radio set to a loudspeaker and asked the village party secretary to organize some 500 listeners by mutual aid teams. She then introduced the program and let the radio transmit a speech by the agricultural minister and a model worker on the virtues of rural cooperatives. By dusk, five more households had pledged to join the cooperative. The remainder of the story chronicles her journey through snow to a second village and an accident with a falling antenna pole that smashed her hand but could not hinder her work.⁴¹

Apart from organizing listeners, radio receptionists transcribed major news and directives from state radio stations, mimeographed the transcripts, and distributed them through the postal system and school pupils to activists at the district, town, and village level. The texts would be copied onto a blackboard bulletin or read out loud via rooftop broadcasting (屋顶广播 *wuding guangbo*), also known as “rustic broadcasting” (土广播 *tu guangbo*), whereby one or more criers used a homemade paper or tin megaphone to broadcast messages from on high.

Rooftop broadcasting was part of the propaganda and mobilization repertoire from the 1940s onwards, during the Second Sino-Japanese War and land reform.⁴² In the 1950s, this practice developed into a regular news-dissemination network, counting some 170,000 rooftop broadcasting spots nationwide by 1953.⁴³ Among Guangxi Province’s 8,705 rooftop broadcasting spots, it was common to build a 2-to-3-meter-high platform of wood, bamboo, or earth in a central location in the village. At around lunchtime or supertime, the schoolteacher or some other literate person would use a tin trumpet or funnel to read a mimeographed newspaper from the local receiving station in the local dialect. Listeners often wandered into the area with their rice bowls and listened as they ate.⁴⁴ For many mountainous villages without wired broadcasting, rooftop broadcasting continued into the 1960s and 1970s: a former organizer of rooftop broadcasting in the

39 Beijing renmin guangbo diantai, *Beijing renmin guangbo diantai zhi*, 28.

40 *Zhongguo de youxian guangbo*, 41–42, 369, 397; Xu, *Guangbo dianshi jianshi*, 22.

41 Qu Yankun, *Shouyinyuan Xiao Wang xiexiang ji* [Radio receptionist Little Wang goes to the countryside] (Jinan: Shandong renmin chubanshe, 1954).

42 Ding Ling, *The Sun Shines over the Sanggan River* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1984), chap. 56.

43 *Zhongguo de youxian guangbo*, 114.

44 *Guangxi tongzhi: guangbo dianshi zhi* [Provincial gazetteer of Guangxi: broadcasting and television], sec. 2.1.2, <http://www.gxdqw.com/bin/mse.exe?seachword=&K=a&A=35&rec=37&run=13>.

1960s recalled that the task was pleasant in the summer and challenging in the winter, when broadcasters had to brave the bitter winds to shout messages at villagers inside their homes.⁴⁵ A calligrapher I interviewed in rural Hubei told me that his first “job” after graduating from middle school in the mid-1970s was to read the Little Red Book with a tin megaphone on top of a hill at the villagers laboring in the rice paddies below. He found the task absurd at the time, since nobody appeared to be listening, but it was still an easier way to earn work points than bending over crops.⁴⁶

The fascinating roles of “radio receptionists” and “rooftop broadcasters” amply demonstrate the significant mediating role of human beings in the Maoist media infrastructure. The Communist “media revolution” involved not only technological innovations and manufacturing advances but also turning human bodies into essential nodes of a mass media network. Thanks to radio receptionists like the fictional Little Wang, a single radio set could have thousands of listeners; the spirit of sacrifice she exemplified helped to compensate for the countryside’s infrastructural deficiencies. In the total absence of radio sets, loudspeakers, and electricity, the voices of tens of thousands of rooftop broadcasters conveyed uniform news and directives from the central government to the peripheral grassroots. At the same time, the state also extended its reach into the vast countryside through more technical means: wired broadcasting.

WIRED BROADCASTING AND MASS MOBILIZATION

By 1951, there were around 1,200 wired broadcasting stations in factories, mines, and railway stations. Schools, work units, and troops also built their own wired broadcasting stations.⁴⁷ The 1950 *Worker Broadcast Manual* (工人广播手册 *Gongren guangbo shouce*) provided guidelines on using such public address systems to increase production by praising model workers, transmit messages from the administration, educate workers about politics and hygiene, and promote cultural activities such as singing, music performances, and radio plays. Workers who could sing Beijing opera and Shaoxing opera on the loudspeakers became overnight celebrities in their factories.⁴⁸ Overall, the factory station was to be “a platform for workers themselves to talk and to sing—workers ought to be their own spokespersons on the broadcasting station.”⁴⁹ Rather than the party-state imposing its all-powerful, booming voice on the ears of the people, there was a literal attempt to “make the subaltern speak” over the loudspeaker as the new masters of the nation.

Much as the factory loudspeaker was meant to empower workers by amplifying their voices, some workers recalled its deployment for labor mobilization as oppressive. My

45 Zhang Haohong, “Jiyi zhong de jietou guangbo” [Remembering street broadcasting] (blogpost), <https://read01.com/L26RPA5.html#.XV2yly2B2CR>.

46 Interview with Zhang Anquan (b. 1955), Hong’an County, Hubei Province, August 13, 2015. This and other cited interviews, unless otherwise noted, were conducted by the author in the context of a broader research project collecting moviegoing and radio-listening memories from the grassroots.

47 *Zhongguo de youxian guangbo*, 12, 333; Xu, *Guangbo dianshi jianshi*, 23.

48 *Gongren guangbo shouce* [Worker broadcast manual] (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin diantai, 1950), 22–34.

49 *Gongren guangbo shouce*, 35.

grandparents, workers in Shanghai's No. 2 Silk Weaving Factory, recalled that their factory loudspeakers during the Great Leap Forward kept reporting updates on the labor production of different workshops as well as honoring labor models by naming and praising them. Each silk weaver used to operate just one machine, but at the behest of the loudspeaker, each took on two and then four and then eight, until my grandmother thought she would collapse from fatigue and stress. As a member of the Communist Youth League, she was told to take the lead, but after experiencing the Great Leap, she decided against applying for party membership. In her old age, she often blamed her growing deafness, high blood pressure, and other health problems on those factory loudspeakers.⁵⁰

Rural wired broadcasting in China had its legendary origins in Jiutai County, Jilin Province. In 1952, the county party secretary reportedly heard the sound of opera on the telephone and learned that there had been crosstalk between the telephone cables and the loudspeaker wires of a local factory's PA system. Inspired by this discovery, he worked with local technicians to develop a countywide wired broadcasting station using telephone cables to connect 330 loudspeakers. These experiments turned Jiutai County into a model for the rest of the country.⁵¹ In 1955, the intensification of rural collectivization was accompanied by a nationwide push to develop rural wired broadcasting. Compared to reception stations, wired broadcasting stations at the county level greatly expanded the number of listeners, provided a propaganda tool to local cadres, and facilitated the control of listening so as to stem the infiltration of enemy radio.⁵² Economically, using wired broadcasting to hold a countywide conference for 1,000 cadres was much cheaper than assembling them for a few days and paying for transportation, meals, and accommodation. Indeed, the savings from a single conference might have been enough to build an entire wired broadcasting network.⁵³ Wang Xuying, a former broadcaster from rural Hebei, recalled that every countywide conference in his mountainous county required about half a month advance notice, for there were not even telephones, so that "correspondents" (通讯员 *tongxunyuan*) had to first deliver the message to village cadres, who had to hire a donkey to travel to the next township to catch a slow bus to the county seat. Given such inadequate transportation infrastructure, the extension of a wired broadcasting network into the mountainous areas in 1969 marked great advances in both communication and governance.⁵⁴

Besides transmitting policy directives to the grassroots, rural wired broadcasting also imparted agricultural knowledge, exchanged experiences, and promoted productivity by praising models and criticizing "backward elements."⁵⁵ Furthermore, wired broadcasting facilitated conscription, vaccination, and "total mobilization" in cases of emergency. For example, when there was a major flood in Sihong County of Jiangsu

50 Interview with Yao Zhanghua (b. 1931), Shanghai, July 2009.

51 Zhang Fengqi, "Xin Zhongguo diyige mianxiang nongcun de youxian guangbowuang" [New China's first wired broadcasting network in rural areas], <http://mingpian.chinajilin.com.cn/jllssddy/201606/2108155.html>.

52 Xu, *Guangbo dianshi jianshi*, 26.

53 *Zhongguo de youxian guangbo*, 132.

54 Interview with Wang Xuying (b. 1955), Laishui County, Hebei Province, February 2017; *Zhongguo de youxian guangbo*, 124, 128.

55 *Zhongguo de youxian guangbo*, 144.

Province in 1956, the local broadcast station mobilized a labor force of 130,000 (about one-third of the county's total population) to save crops and repair roads. In suppressing a "counterrevolutionary riot" in Hubei's Hanyang County, it was reported that areas with loudspeakers achieved peace sooner than areas without.⁵⁶ Peasants in Haining, Zhejiang Province, reportedly invented a ditty to summarize their enthusiasm for wired broadcasting: "Wind-Accompanying Ear, Thousand-Mile Eye, clarifying major affairs under heaven, rapidly transmitting news from the center, forecasting wind and frost, rain and snow; there's politics and there's art, as if someone is sent from up on high, as if we have our own theater; how we love broadcasting!"⁵⁷

Both the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution saw the proliferation of loudspeakers at unprecedented volume and were thus historical epochs of great "sound and fury" (大造声势 *dazhang shengshi*). To give a sense of the changing soundscape in numbers, in the Beijing suburbs, 85,000 high-volume loudspeakers (高音喇叭 *gaoyin laba*) took the place of softer amplifiers in 1958, but the number had dwindled to 29,000 by 1960. The year 1969 saw a renewed attempt to build up wired broadcasting, with a total of 770,000 (mostly low-volume) loudspeakers installed by 1970, a number that dwindled to less than half by 1978.⁵⁸ Unlike high-volume loudspeakers, low-volume speakers (低音喇叭 *diyin laba*) were usually installed in residential courtyards or homes, so they were also called "indoor speakers" (入户喇叭 *ruhu laba*) or "little speakers" (小喇叭 *xiao laba*). In Tibet, the total number of loudspeakers increased from 75 in 1965 to 27,671 in 1976, some 90% of which were indoor speakers.⁵⁹ Guided by the principle that "Chairman Mao's highest directive should not become overnight news," the nationwide growth of loudspeakers during the Cultural Revolution decade also had to do with a concrete 1969 policy directive that made county-level broadcasting systems part of the national, rather than local, budget.⁶⁰ As a result, there were 93 million loudspeakers in the Chinese countryside by 1973, more than 10 times the 8.5 million prior to the Cultural Revolution.⁶¹ Yet quantity did not promise quality, for the people soon described the growth of wired broadcasting in this period as "construction in the first year, chaos by the second, and paralysis by the third." Inferior construction materials and careless engineering turned many loudspeakers into "broadcast deaf-mutes" (广播哑叭 *guangbo yaba*) or, worse, caused electrocution accidents. Loudspeakers also suffered from sabotage by local villagers who, for whatever reasons, did not like to listen to them or repurposed the raw materials.⁶²

From the government's perspective, although one of the obvious advantages of wired broadcasting over wireless was control over what the people heard, there were still "political accidents" that involved the rediffusion of enemy radio. To give one example from several documents on such broadcasting incidents I found at the Shanghai Municipal Archives, one party secretary wanted to use his production brigade's amplifier to mobilize

56 *Zhongguo de youxian guangbo*, 373.

57 *Zhongguo de youxian guangbo*, 373.

58 *Zhongguo de youxian guangbo*, 274–75.

59 *Xizang zizhiquzhi: guangbo dianying dianshi zhi* [Provincial gazetteer of Tibet Autonomous Region: broadcasting, film, and television], 53.

60 *Zhongguo de youxian guangbo*, 94, 400.

61 *Zhongguo de youxian guangbo*, 201.

62 *Zhongguo de youxian guangbo*, 194, 243, 400.

the village to prepare against an imminent typhoon at about 3:00 in the morning, but he did not notice that the FM radio was on when he connected the amplifier, transmitting “the strange voices of a man and a woman speaking in an affected manner. . . . The broadcast content was the Chiang bandit party’s instigation of defection as well as slander that our countryside lacks food and clothing. The broadcast was repeated once and reached the 200-plus loudspeakers installed inside every household save that of the ‘four elements.’”⁶³

From a grassroots listener’s point of view, these wired indoor loudspeakers became most Chinese villagers’ only gateway to the outside world, since there was no television at the time, the mobile movie team came rarely, and newspapers were only available to cadres. Li Caiping, who grew up in rural Gansu, recalled that her production brigade had a wired broadcasting station whose technical paraphernalia included a radio to transmit national and provincial stations, a gramophone to broadcast songs about labor or revolution, and a microphone with which the brigade leader could summon all villagers through one outdoor and many indoor loudspeakers. She further described the indoor speaker as a “paper bowl with a magnet and a bunch of wires,” adding, “we had no electricity for lighting, but everyone could hear broadcasting.”⁶⁴ Dong Weilian, a former Shanghai sent-down youth in Jiangxi, learned how to make and install little speakers—specifically moving-iron speakers or “reed speakers” (舌簧喇叭 *shehuang laba*)—in villager homes around 1970. Connected to the commune station through wires, these reed speakers became the villagers’ only means of receiving news and entertainment at the county, provincial, and national levels for nearly a decade.⁶⁵ According to Wang Xuying, a former county broadcaster from rural Hebei, the installation of such indoor loudspeakers was initially required of and welcomed by villagers, who could turn them on and off with the tug of a line. However, when the speakers broke for any reason, villagers would rarely pay to have them repaired.⁶⁶ Zhao Shan, a former sent-down youth in Manchuria, recalled listening to national radio broadcasts via such indoor loudspeakers every evening, but he noted the poor acoustic quality of the speakers, whose sound could be affected by the vagaries of weather, so his mother bought him a radio to help him stay abreast of the times. Local villagers often came to sent-down youths’ dormitories to listen to their radios and sometimes delegated them to buy radio sets from Shanghai, suggesting that the wired loudspeakers were far from fulfilling their listening wishes.⁶⁷

Despite imperfections, wired broadcasting systems and their loudspeakers played an important role in (re)structuring the rhythm of a rural community’s everyday life. Since most villagers did not own clocks or watches until the 1980s, rural loudspeakers had something in common with the bell and drum towers of premodern Chinese towns,

63 “Guanyu Beizhuang dadui fasheng yiqi cuozhuan ditai guangbo de yanzhong zhengzhi shijian de baogao” [Report on a major political accident of mistakenly transmitting enemy radio in Beizhuang brigade], 1974, B285-2-178-4, Zhonggong Qingpu xian weiyuanhui wenjian [CCP Qingpu County documents], Shanghai Municipal Archives.

64 Interview by Hai Peng with Li Caiping (b. 1961), Ningxia Province, April 2017.

65 WeChat interview with Dong Weilian (b. 1952), October 27, 2016.

66 Interview with Wang Xuying (b. 1955), Laishui County, Hebei Province, February 2017.

67 Interview with Zhao Shan (b. 1953), Shanghai, November 2016.

telling time and regulating a community's daily rhythms.⁶⁸ The loudspeakers of rural wired broadcasting systems also resembled the church bells that helped to structure everyday life in nineteenth-century France, as Alain Corbin detailed in his study; like village bells, loudspeakers sounded to mark the beginning and end of each work day, called on villagers to congregate, warned against inclement weather, and mobilized against emergency.⁶⁹ Both village bells and wired broadcasting loudspeakers "helped define the territorial boundaries of meaningful communities, not only by drawing those within earshot into a shared auditory landscape but because many of their pealed [or broadcast] messages were fully decipherable only to those familiar with localized codes" and, in the Chinese case, local dialects.⁷⁰

Beyond analogies with premodern drums and bells, however, village loudspeakers used in conjunction with rural collectivization also introduced a more regimented, industrial concept of time and work discipline. The ethnographic study *Chen Village* gave an account of how the brigade broadcaster "became the village's relentless timekeeper" starting from the 1966 installation of some 30 wired loudspeakers throughout the village. The time she "came on the air in the morning varied from season to season," but "the first announcement was to get the women out of bed to allow them ample time to feed the pigs and prepare breakfast before their husbands arose." For two hours in the morning and another two hours in the evening, the loudspeaker system rediffused the provincial radio station half of the time, and the other half of the broadcasting time was "devoted to brigade news and pep talks." The broadcaster "kept a very close watch on all the daily goings-on in the village at all levels. The Mao Thought counselors in each production team became her chief sources of information. But, if need be, she got on a bicycle and pedaled from labor squad to labor squad, participating in their work and gathering materials for her reporting. When peasants saw her coming, they would nervously joke: 'Better watch out; if you get a little lazy, the next thing you know you're on the loudspeakers.'" Most of the time, however, the broadcaster praised the villagers, both individual labor models and production teams, and she "persistently played upon the peasants' pride in their team to spur them to race against other teams."⁷¹

This account of the loudspeaker system's impact on a village's work discipline is highly reminiscent of its impact on the Shanghai factory at the beginning of this section. In helping to "industrialize" rural labor, village loudspeakers were not only technologies of propaganda but also of surveillance, such that slackers would be noted and even publicly shamed. Its contribution to local governance, however, depended not only on the technological mediation of wired broadcasting but also on the human mediation—or

68 Cited in Wu Hung, "Monumentality of Time: Giant Clocks, the Drum Tower, the Clock Tower," in Robert S. Nelson and Margaret Olin, eds., *Monuments and Memory: Made and Unmade* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 114.

69 Alain Corbin, *Village Bells: Sound and Meaning in the 19th-Century French Countryside*, trans. Martin Thom (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

70 The quotation is from Susan Carol Rogers, review of *Village Bells: Sound and Meaning in the 19th-Century French Countryside*, by Alain Corbin, trans. Martin Thom, *Journal of Modern History* 73, no. 1 (2001): 175–77.

71 Anita Chan, Richard Madsen, and Jonathan Unge, *Chen Village under Mao and Deng* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 84–87.

“spirit mediumship”—of the broadcaster, who gave spirit-boosting talks to inspire voluntarism from the villagers and to reinforce their revolutionary faith. As I will show in the next section, loudspeakers also played an important role in creating sacred acoustic spaces and facilitating other quasi-religious rituals of the Mao cult.

THE SACRED VIOLENCE OF LOUDSPEAKERS IN THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION

Going beyond the top-down development of a wired broadcasting infrastructure, Red Guards and rebel groups also took bottom-up initiatives to acquire, install, and deploy loudspeakers as revolutionary acts with the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. The auditory memory of the ensuing decade is thus defined by the deafening sound of loudspeakers, especially high-volume kinds looming over most public spaces from urban centers to county seats to village squares. This section will tease out ways that loudspeakers were used to amplify the sacred violence of the Cultural Revolution.

In August 1966, the Red Guards of “Maoism Middle School” issued 100 new rules to “smash the four olds and build up a new world.” Among the first initiatives was to install broadcast stations in all parks and major streets to propagate Maoism.⁷² In subsequent months, Red Guard groups nationwide installed high-volume loudspeakers on buildings as well as on vans, buses, and trucks. These propaganda vehicles went around broadcasting revolutionary songs and slogans as well as distributing flyers in the cities’ major thoroughfares. When Zhou Enlai met with Red Rebel Groups at Dalian Railway Institute in December 1966, the representatives asked to buy loudspeakers as an essential weapon of their rebellion.⁷³

The proliferation of high-volume loudspeakers in 1966 helped generate new spectacles and turn streets, squares, parks, and other public spaces into revolutionary stages. A former Red Guard from Baoshan County recalled being mobilized as a 16-year-old in the winter of 1966 to “make revolution” in Shanghai. As he was marching down Nanjing Road, loudspeakers on high-rise buildings on both sides kept on broadcasting “quotation songs” from the Little Red Book. This “peasant rebel group” also installed a loudspeaker outside of their window to read their “Peasant Declaration” to the passersby on the Bund, but this was immediately drowned out by the dozens of loudspeakers installed by other Red Guard groups.⁷⁴ Wang Xuying from Laishui County of Hebei Province recalled seeing and hearing high-volume loudspeakers for the first time in the Cultural Revolution, installed by warring factions in the square of the county seat: “Both sides clamored at the same time, such that you couldn’t understand what either side might be saying if you were

72 “Mao Zedong zhuyi xuexiao (yuan ershiliu zhong) hong weibing “pojuilixin yibaili” [Maoism School (originally No. 26 Middle School) Red Guard “hundred rules for smashing the old and establishing the new”], August 1966, repr. in Song Yongyi, ed., *The Chinese Cultural Revolution Database* (Hong Kong: Universities Service Centre for China Studies, 2002).

73 “Zhou Enlai jiejian Dalian tiedao xueyuan hongse zaofantuan shi de tanhua” [Zhou Enlai’s meeting with Red Rebel Group of Dalian Railway Institute], December 18, 1966, in Song, *Chinese Cultural Revolution Database*.

74 Yang Xing, “Nongmin zaofan ji” [Account of peasant rebellion], *Minjian lishi* [Popular history], <http://mj1sh.usc.cuhk.edu.hk/book.aspx?cid=6&tid=169&pid=2539>.

standing in the middle.”⁷⁵ Perhaps there was indeed little difference in content between the speeches of opposing factions, as they both quoted Mao and copied from the *People's Daily*. Instead, the escalating volume of competing loudspeakers suggests that power in the Cultural Revolution was measured in decibels.

The loudspeaker has been a most effective tool for occupying urban space in various twentieth-century contexts. Both the Nazi and Communist parties sought to establish an acoustic presence in German cities, which also led to “sonic brawling.” In 1932, Nazis used loudspeaker vans during election campaigns to attract attention on the streets, which “provided the party with the opportunity to achieve a mediated acoustic dominance in the city, with the potential to drown out the sounds of political opponents.”⁷⁶ In addition to loudspeakers, the synchronized footsteps of storm troopers and the striking greeting of “Heil Hitler” also helped the Nazis acoustically conquer the city.⁷⁷ Writing about contemporary Nigeria, Brian Larkin highlighted the assaultive quality of loudspeakers, which can transgress boundaries and “discharge sounds without the ability of listeners to control them.”⁷⁸ While the call to prayer through loudspeakers has helped to create among Islamic communities a “sacred acoustic space” and “pious landscape,”⁷⁹ Larkin points out that loudspeakers have always played a role in religious conflicts as “symbolic objects to defend and instruments of attack.”⁸⁰

Broadcasting “The East Is Red” each dawn, loudspeakers certainly played their part in creating sacred acoustic spaces all over China. Apart from their quasi-religious *content*, the very reverberant acoustic quality of mediated sound issuing from multiple loudspeakers facilitated such “sacred acoustics.” Various ancient cultures have used as sacred spaces of worship large enclosed spaces whose acoustic properties were defined by long reverberation times.⁸¹ For example, in churches “the directness of sounds that cannot be located” or “the anonymity of the sound source built into the architecture” helps make church liturgy “part of the heavenly liturgy.”⁸² The nowhere-yet-everywhere quality of reverberant acoustics can be achieved not only through sound bouncing off the enclosures of architecture, but also—as was the case in the Cultural Revolution—through multiple high-volume loudspeakers installed in open spaces. Their echoing effect results from unequal distances traveled on cables toward loudspeakers. We can readily hear such reverberations from documentary reproductions of, say, Red Guards listening to loudspeakers on Tiananmen Square. In fact, loudspeakers are even better than reverberant architecture for creating a powerful disembodied voice or “acousmatic” sounds—“sounds one hears without seeing their originating source”—so that “radio, phonograph, and telephone,

75 Interview with Wang Xuying, Laishui County, Hebei Province, February 2017.

76 Carolyn Birdsall, *Nazi Soundscapes* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), 39.

77 Birdsall, *Nazi Soundscapes*, 39–40.

78 Brian Larkin, “Techniques of Inattention: The Mediality of Loudspeakers in Nigeria,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 87, no. 4 (2014): 989–1015.

79 Tong Soon Lee, “Technology and the Production of Islamic Space: The Call to Prayer in Singapore,” *Ethnomusicology* 43 (1999): 86–100, quotation on 94.

80 Larkin, “Techniques of Inattention,” 1009.

81 Barry Blesser and Linda-Ruth Salter, “Ancient Acoustic Spaces,” in Jonathan Sterne, ed., *The Sound Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 186–96.

82 Kurt Blaukopf, *Musical Life in a Changing Society*, trans. David Marinelli (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1982), 182.

all [of] which transmit sounds without showing their emitter, are acousmatic media by definition.”⁸³ Acousmatic voices have “the ability to be everywhere, to see all, to know all, and to have complete power. In other words: ubiquity, panopticism, omniscience, and omnipotence.”⁸⁴ Though it was hardly an intended effect, reverberation through loudspeakers may well have contributed to a sense of sanctity deriving from the omnipresence of disembodied voices.

At the height of Mao’s personality cult, it was not uncommon for a broadcasting station to lead the daily-prayer-like “ask for instructions in the morning and report back in the evenings” and the catechistic repetition of Mao quotations, which were also set to music in the form of quotation songs. Just as the reverberant acoustics of ancient sacred spaces affected the types of music composed and performed for these spaces,⁸⁵ the dissemination of quotation songs over loudspeakers also affected their musical composition. Analyzing records of quotation songs, Andrew F. Jones argued that their musical “production is perfectly suited to unison singing, melding choral voices and the orchestral accompaniment together into a monophonic wall of sound, one pitched high enough and with enough amplitude to penetrate the public spaces in which these songs were usually broadcast on monaural in-line loudspeaker systems.”⁸⁶ In terms of everyday practice, an interviewee from Beijing, Li Rong, recalled that the local broadcast station of her parents’ work unit used to stop all pedestrians in their paths by calling on everyone to read or recite from the Little Red Book, turning to a certain page and line. She noted, “When I traveled later to Morocco and saw how loudspeakers on minarets called Muslims to prayer five times a day, and how men in robes would prostrate themselves wherever they happened to be, I was really reminded of myself during the Cultural Revolution.”⁸⁷ Another interviewee from Shanghai, Sun Xiaoping, recalled being summoned often to school in late evenings between 1967 and 1969 to listen to Chairman Mao’s latest directive, after which there would be a compulsory, celebratory parade with gongs and drums and loudspeaker vehicles.⁸⁸ Also in the Cultural Revolution, many mass rallies began with “The East is Red” and ended with “The Internationale” on the loudspeaker. Yet between singing “he is the people’s great savior” and “no savior from on high delivers,” many people began to think through the revolution’s contradictions.

Various scholars have pointed to the quasi-religious qualities of the Chinese revolution. The very word “revolution” (革命 *geming*) in Chinese, as Liu Xiaobo has argued, “connotes a supreme sense of the sacred and an exaggerated righteousness.”⁸⁹ Elizabeth J. Perry has suggested an analogy between the Cultural Revolution and religious crusades “directed against both heretics and infidels, or internal and external enemies.”⁹⁰ Stefan

83 Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 72.

84 Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 24.

85 Blesser and Salter, “Ancient Acoustic Spaces,” 194.

86 Jones, “Quotation Songs,” 55.

87 Interview with Li Rong (b. 1960), Shanghai, November 2016.

88 Interview with Sun Xiaoping (b. 1954), Shanghai, November 2016.

89 Liu Xiaobo, “That Holy Word, ‘Revolution,’” in Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom and Elizabeth J. Perry, eds., *Popular Protest and Political Culture in Modern China*, 2nd ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994), 309–24.

90 Elizabeth J. Perry, “Reflecting on Anyuan,” *PRC History Review* 1, no. 2 (August 2015): 17–19.

Landsberger has analyzed religious aspects of the Mao cult through the visual medium of propaganda posters, arguing that grassroots practices surrounding Mao's image were reminiscent of existing traditional cults devoted to various protective and domestic deities.⁹¹

Unlike the mass dissemination of Mao's image, however, Mao's voice was only rarely heard over the radio or in the newsreels in which he frequently appeared. Mao's "latest directives" were always read out by radio broadcasters, and in documentaries of Mao's meetings with the masses on Tiananmen Square, the chairman is only seen and hardly ever heard. One might speculate that Mao's thick Hunan accent rendered his spoken words incomprehensible to most Chinese, but that doesn't explain why Lin Biao, with his heavy Hubei accent, often addressed the masses at rallies and over the radio. Indeed, the historical broadcast of Mao's voice announcing the founding of the People's Republic in 1949 turned out to be less the standard than the exception of reproducing and transmitting the chairman's voice. Thus Mao was quite unlike other world leaders such as Churchill, Roosevelt, Hitler, and Stalin, who consistently used technologies of sound amplification and transmission to "croon to" or "spellbind" national audiences in an age when radio was the dominant medium of political communication.⁹² While Mao's image and words held sacred authority and were reproduced ad infinitum, his voice was, for the most part, as mute and mysterious to the national community as the Shōwa Emperor's voice until Japan's declaration of surrender. The historic broadcast of August 1945 demoted the emperor "from god to human being, stripping him of his aura," as well as "made him the phantom emperor of a phantom realm."⁹³ In a similar sense, the relative muteness of the visually omnipresent Mao amidst a cacophony of loudspeakers also served to uphold the numinous powers of a deity.

Although Mao's own voice was rarely broadcast, other voices that read his words out loud over loudspeakers took on divine authority in the Cultural Revolution. Mao's words became sacred scripts in revolutionary performances that in turn engendered collective violence.⁹⁴ In this process, loudspeakers became revolutionary crusaders' weapons that amplified and escalated conflict, such that acoustic battles often foreboded and fueled physical violence. In fact, accounts of factional conflict in Red Guard newspapers, local histories, and memoirs inevitably mention the roles of loudspeakers. In Nanjing, opposing factions set up broadcasting stations on the buildings they occupied and loudspeakers on the trees and electrical poles of major thoroughfares. Both sides tried to sabotage the other by destroying loudspeakers, sometimes leading to accidental electrocution.⁹⁵ In Chongqing, a major factional battle was waged in August 1967 over a broadcasting

91 Stefan R. Landsberger, "The Deification of Mao: Religious Imagery and Practices During the Cultural Revolution and Beyond," in Woei Lien Chong, ed., *China's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution: Master Narratives and Post-Mao Counternarratives* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 139–84.

92 Huub Wijfjes, "Spellbinding and Crooning: Sound Amplification, Radio, and Political Rhetoric in International Comparative Perspective, 1900–1945," *Technology and Culture* 55, no. 1 (2014): 148–85.

93 Kerim Yasar, *Electrified Voices: How the Telephone, Phonograph, and Radio Shaped Modern Japan, 1868–1945* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 19–20.

94 Guobin Yang, *The Red Guard Generation and Political Activism in China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 10–15.

95 Luo Weinian, ed., *Hongqiang: wenge wushi zhounian jishi wenji* [Red wall: narrative collection of the Cultural Revolution] (New York: World Chinese Press, 2016), 85, 114.

station next to the Liberation Monument in the city center, where many citizens used to gather and listen every day.⁹⁶ In Changchun, loudspeaker vans were pushed over, battered, and burned, and shouting matches between two loudspeaker vans often escalated into bloodshed.⁹⁷ Sometimes opposing factions also reached a peaceful compromise and shared a broadcasting station: a former broadcaster at a Shanghai university recalled in an interview that her faction had control of the station on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Friday, whereas the other faction had control on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays; Sunday was serenity for everyone.⁹⁸

What was the impact of loudspeaker sound on the listeners? For those embroiled in factional conflicts, it was clearly a call to arms, and the broadcasting stations were headquarters issuing orders with stirring battle hymns. For most ordinary residents nearby, loudspeakers were noise that assailed their eardrums, tore at their nerves, and disrupted their sleep. For persecuted intellectuals and other targets of struggle, the loudspeaker was often a source of terror, because “Red Guards used loudspeakers to call out professors to be struggled against or paraded around.”⁹⁹ Renowned scholar Chen Yinke (陈寅恪 1890–1969) lived across from the clock tower of Sun Yat-sen University. From 1966 to 1969, a high concentration of loudspeakers besieged this bedridden old man, who even in ordinary times relied on sleeping pills to make it through the night. Red Guards knew that he was blind but not deaf, so during struggle sessions they would hang several loudspeakers at his window, so that this “reactionary academic authority could hear the angry indictment of the revolutionary masses.”¹⁰⁰ In Beijing, writer Shen Congwen (沈从文 1902–1988) was never the primary target of struggle sessions in 1966 but always an “accompaniment.” Due to his fragile health, he was sometimes allowed to sit in a small room next to the auditorium with a loudspeaker shouting shrill speeches in his ear.¹⁰¹ When sent down to a “cadre school” in the Hubei countryside in 1969, he considered it a great improvement of living conditions to move out of earshot of the local high-volume loudspeaker.¹⁰²

In his book *Sonic Warfare*, Steve Goodman examined the “environments, or ecologies, in which sound contributes to an immersive atmosphere or ambience of fear and dread where sound helps produce a bad vibe.”¹⁰³ Although Goodman used mostly military examples to illustrate the power of sound as a tactic of intimidation, some deployments

96 He Shu, *Wei Mao zhuxi er zhan: wenge Chongqing da wudou shilu* [Fight for Chairman Mao: documentary records of factional warfare in Chongqing in the Cultural Revolution] (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2010), 143. See also Guobin Yang, *Red Guard Generation*, 46, 57.

97 Gufanyipian [A Lone Sailboat], *Suiyue ruge* [Song-like years], memoir published online at <https://book.tianya.cn/chapter-57318-1739999>, chap. 28.

98 Interview with Zhou Zhili (b. 1944), Shanghai, November 2016.

99 Gan Xiaosu, *Zongdai he wo* [Zongdai and I] (Chongqing: Chongqing chubanshe, 1991).

100 Chen Liuqiu, Chen Xiaopeng, and Chen Meiyuan, “Mianhuai Liu Jie xiansheng” [Remembering Mr. Liu Jie], *Minjian lishi* [Popular history], <http://mjls.usc.cuhk.edu.hk/book.aspx?cid=4&tid=467>.

101 Li Yang, *Shen Congwen de zuihou sishi nian* [Shen Congwen’s last 40 years] (Beijing: Zhongguo wenshi chubanshe, 2005), 187.

102 Shen Congwen to Zhang Zhaohe, September 17, 1969, *Shen Congwen quanji* (Taiyuan: Beiyuewenyi chubanshe, 2002), vol. 22, 375.

103 Steve Goodman, *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), xiv.

of loudspeakers in the Cultural Revolution may well fit into the same category of “sonic warfare.” Interviewee Li Rong recalled that one rebel faction in power would call on “capitalist roaders” to appear before impromptu interrogations—or else suffer such and such consequence—and then place an alarm clock next to the microphone to magnify the time bomb-like ticking. Sometimes they called out names and sometimes they didn’t, and since her father was among the denounced, the amplified ticking terrified her whole family.¹⁰⁴ Such sadistic practices may have been more idiosyncratic than typical, testifying to the heterogeneous uses of loudspeaker systems.

In an age when electronic media had not yet entered most ordinary homes, however, loudspeakers could also serve as an important source of musical entertainment. A blogger from Shanghai who used to live across from a “brazen and tireless” factory loudspeaker recalled that, “between crusading against the Black Line and praising the Great Leader,” this loudspeaker would broadcast “Chairman Mao’s Works Shine Golden Light” sung by a “Shanghai Gaoqiao Chemical Factory’s Amateur Chairman Mao Thought Propaganda Team.” This listener found the women’s choir shrill and jarring, but the song itself was cheerful and soft, even melodious. When quotation songs were in fashion, this broadcaster, effectively a DJ, chose to play two that were particularly serene: “We Communist Party Members Are Like Seeds” and “Our Educational Policy” served as fitting lullabies for the blogger’s one-year-old nephew. After some time, local residents got used to the loudspeaker, so that whenever it was silent, they would ask one another, “What happened? Did another faction just take over?” In the early 1970s, however, a different broadcaster with different musical taste was in charge and played only aggressive and repetitive songs like “The Proletarian Cultural Revolution Is Just Great! Is Just Great! Is Just Great!”¹⁰⁵

While the public soundscape of the Cultural Revolution was dominated by loudspeakers, it was also the golden age of amateur radio, which facilitated private, clandestine listening practices, especially to the so-called “enemy stations” (敌台 *dítai*) from beyond Chinese borders, such as Voice of America, Radio Moscow, BBC, and the Taiwan-based Radio Free China. A comprehensive discussion of amateur radio and enemy stations is beyond the scope of this paper, so I only mention them to suggest the possibilities of subversive listening practices in a soundscape dominated by loudspeakers.¹⁰⁶

The end of the Cultural Revolution was also sounded by the high-volume loudspeaker, which created a nationwide congregation to mourn the passing of the Great Helmsman. An interviewee from rural Ningxia recalled that, after Mao’s death, her entire school was organized to participate in various mourning ceremonies without holding classes: “Funeral music came out of loudspeakers everywhere and lasted from morning to evening, creating a dark, somber mood: we didn’t know where China was going; we didn’t know who was going to take over.”¹⁰⁷ Soon thereafter, in 1977, the Central Broadcasting Affairs Bureau issued a directive to dismantle high-volume loudspeakers in urban and rural areas to reduce noise pollution. The directive made some exceptions to retain some

104 Interview with Li Rong (b. 1960), Shanghai, November 2016.

105 Yangliu gongshe [Willow Commune], “Pinwei gaoyin laba” [Loudspeaker and taste] (blog), <http://www.hxzq.net/aspshow/showarticle.asp?id=7243>.

106 Ah Cheng, “On Listening to Enemy Radio,” trans. Yurou Zhong, <http://u.osu.edu/mclc/online-series/zhongyurou/>.

107 Interview conducted by Hai Peng with a woman from rural Ningxia born in 1962, April 2017.

loudspeakers in response to popular demand, provided that these did not affect nearby residents, schools, and work units.¹⁰⁸

CONCLUSION

Although electrical acoustic technologies transformed sonic environments all over the world, they did not create a singular homogeneous “soundscape of modernity.” In the context of socialist China, it may be more illuminating to analyze the relationship of media technologies to *revolution* rather than to *modernity*. To speak of the Communist revolution as a media revolution is to discuss revolution *in* media (content), *of* media (infrastructure), and *through* media (impact). Focusing on auditory technologies and their revolutionary echoes, I have shown how a growing infrastructure of radios and loudspeakers not only enabled revolutionary words and songs to reverberate throughout the vast Chinese geography but also helped to turn dispersed populations into mobilized masses who had to echo the revolutionary mandate using their own voices and bodies. Reverberant loudspeakers also defined the “sound and the fury” of the Cultural Revolution, abetting the Mao cult by creating sacred acoustic spaces while fueling factional violence and terrorizing victims.

Whether heard in public or private, radios and loudspeakers helped weave together a broadcast *network* that connected the Chinese population in unprecedented new ways to their local, national, and international communities. From the public address systems of factories to wired radio in rural counties, local broadcasting in socialist China not only served to transmit central government propaganda but also dictated everyday rhythms and rituals and mobilized and entertained the local populace in local dialects and often for local purposes. The rediffusion of national radio programs throughout the country, at the same time, via omnipresent loudspeakers also helped to establish that “shared simultaneity of experience crucial to Benedict Anderson’s concept of the modern imagined community.”¹⁰⁹ The widespread practice of listening to enemy radio, however, further connected many Chinese to a more cosmopolitan world beyond national boundaries. If, in the words of Peter Sloterdijk, “the ear is the organ that connects the intimate and the distant,”¹¹⁰ then radio sets and loudspeakers had staged a media revolution in China not only by amplifying the “throat and tongue” of the state but also by extending the ears of the populace.

To evoke the legacies of the Mao era’s listening technologies and practices, I would like to end this article with two personal anecdotes on the postsocialist echoes of radios and loudspeakers. While growing up with my grandparents in Shanghai in the 1980s, I woke up every morning to the Central People’s Broadcasting Station blasting from a large vacuum-tube radio set on the dresser and fell asleep every evening to the surreptitious murmuring of Voice of America from a small transistor radio by my grandfather’s pillow. In the spring of 1989, as another revolution thundered in the distance, it dawned on me that the two stations reported the same events from opposite standpoints, using different

108 *Zhongguo de youxian guangbo*, 96–97.

109 Michelle Hilmes, “Radio and the Imagined Community,” in Sterne, *Sound Studies Reader*, 186–96.

110 Peter Sloterdijk, *Bubbles: Spheres I*, trans. Wieland Hoban (Los Angeles: Semiotexte, 2011): 520.

words and tones, but when I imitated the voices of their newscasters and sang their radio theme tunes, my grandparents were alarmed rather than amused. My grandmother's scolding silenced my childish echoes, but the cacophony in the air also enabled my first epiphany, that is, a skepticism of all voices of authority.

In the summer of 2001, my parents took me to visit the state-owned farm at the northeastern Sino-Soviet border where they spent a decade as sent-down youths. Shortly after our arrival at around 4:30 PM, we heard the high-volume loudspeaker attached to the top of a giant chimney inscribed with the words: "Enthusiastically Celebrate Chairman Mao's May Seventh Directive." The red paint had faded to the dull color of rust, just about to blend illegibly into the bricks of the chimney. Yet the loudspeaker still seemed to have plenty of life and gusto. The first half hour was news programming from the county broadcasting station and headlines from Beijing. The local weather forecast served as an interlude, transitioning to the next half hour of popular music from the 1960s to the 1980s, including revolutionary songs, model operas, Teresa Teng, Cui Jian's early rock, and TV drama theme songs such as that from *Yearnings*. My US liberal education had left me with a mental image of the loudspeaker as aggressive and oppressive, redolent of prisons, gulags, and totalitarianism. Yet the atmosphere it generated was positively exuberant, and my parents, who had recently given up their Chinese citizenship, hummed along and tapped their feet. Blasting out voices that used to whisper, the loudspeaker featured a nostalgic repertoire that leveled what used to be propaganda and counterculture. In fact, even today, more than 40 years after the end of the Cultural Revolution, we can still hear many echoes of the Mao era in the pandemonium of the contemporary Chinese soundscape.

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