

Socialist Modernity in the Wasteland: Changing Representations of the Female Tractor Driver in China, 1949–1964[†]

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After the communist takeover in 1949, women's relationships with agricultural technology in rural China gradually transformed. The gender-based division of labor in premodern times had often relegated rural women to weaving in the domestic sphere, and farming brought men into a more public sphere. Women and men were associated with different technologies and machines (e.g., women with the loom, men with the plow) and were assigned gendered social roles. But Mao Zedong and his Communist Party cohorts regarded the traditional family and family-based agricultural production as sites of patriarchal oppression; during the agricultural collectivization campaigns of the 1950s, they advocated that women should participate in socialist production in the public sphere. Women and men would do the same work in the fields and would thus be equal, at least theoretically.

Part of this campaign to transform women's roles in Chinese society was the artistic and literary representation of rural women doing men's work. Women were depicted using machines traditionally associated with

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men, especially the tractor, one of the most advanced pieces of agricultural technology available at that time. Indeed, the female tractor driver (*nǚ tuolajishou*) became a popular symbol of the new socialist woman, and she was represented as playing an important role in the major effort to reclaim wasteland on state farms. She appeared not only in the form of real people in magazine photographs, news reports, and other official documents, but also as a fictional figure in literature, art, and films, although the boundary between the historical and the fictional was not always clear-cut. A well-known example is the female tractor driver represented on the one yuan denomination of RMB banknotes in 1962. As a popular icon, she stood for the achievements of socialist modernity: technological modernization in agriculture (the use of the most advanced machine) and, more important, gender equality (women handling modern machines like men), which is the focus of this essay.

Maoist discourse of gender equality advocated for the sameness and equality of women and men in the public sphere and encouraged gender-neutral representations. In fact, it has been a long-held belief that women in socialist China were represented as masculine as part of a rhetoric of gender erasure and desexualization that subordinated sexual and gender differences to class difference (Meng 1993: 119; M. Yang 1999: 40). Although this argument undoubtedly captures the trend at that time, scholars have increasingly expanded this view by revealing the subtle gender stratifications in Maoist representations of women (Chen 2003*b*; Evans 1997, 1999; Hershatter 2011; Roberts 2004, 2006). Whereas these studies address socialist women in general, in this essay I focus specifically on the representations of the female tractor driver and highlight the roles of machines, technology, and socialist modernity in the (trans)formation of gender and sexual differences, a topic rarely discussed in previous studies on Maoist China.

To this end, I engage with at least two strands of scholarship: the first concerns the role of machines and technology in feminist (re)formulations

of gender and sexual differences (Doane 1990; Haraway 1991; de Lauretis 1987; Braidotti 2002), and the second is the study of women and Chinese (socialist) modernity (Chow 1991; Rofel 1999; Barlow 2004). In drawing from and engaging with these studies, I demonstrate that representations of the female tractor driver from 1949 to 1964 were far more subtle and complex than is generally recognized and that the egalitarian and masculine ideals of official socialist rhetoric would seem to allow. Although the representations in the early 1950s might fit in well with the Maoist official discourse of gender erasure and gender equality, which was later supported by the Western feminist scholars just mentioned, in the late 1950s many representations constructed the female tractor driver as gendered in traditional configurations of femininity, which was the very antithesis of socialist modernity. The changing representations of the female tractor driver thus embodied not only the promises but also the limitations of socialist modernity at a time when China underwent drastic yet uncertain sociohistorical changes.

Socialist Modernity, Tractors, and Women in Rural China

It has long been held that modernity originated in the West in the eighteenth century—the age of enlightenment and reason and the beginning of the industrial revolution—and diffused from there to the rest of the world. In this singular and hegemonic formulation of modernity, the West is the center that acts, and the rest of the world is the belated periphery that passively reacts to modernity's arrival. Many scholars have questioned this Eurocentric view of modernity by proposing notions of “alternative modernities” (Goankar 2001), “modernity at large” (Appadurai 1996), “multiple modernities” (Eisenstadt 2000), and “polycentric modernities” (Friedman 2015). These scholars argue that modernity did not necessarily originate in the West; instead, multiple, coeval modernities existed across different times and locations.

However, socialist modernity (especially that of the Maoist era) as an

alternative modernity has long been ignored in the scholarship. The reason for this dismissal of socialist modernity lies in the deep-rooted equation of modernity with capitalism and westernization. To be modern usually meant to adopt a Western capitalist mode of production; because they adhered to a noncapitalist mode of production, socialist countries were regarded as antimodern and were therefore excluded from the project of modernity. We need to recognize that the anticapitalist and antiwestern mode of production in socialist countries is not necessarily antimodern, but an attempt to be modern in alternative and radical ways (Lin 2006: 23; Rofel 1999: 24; Dirlik 2002, 2005; Liu Kang 1996). Moreover, there are many forms of socialist modernity. Socialist China did not seek to replicate the Soviet model, although its influence was still powerful; rather, Chinese socialist modernity developed its own features specific to its sociohistorical context (Meisner 1977). Although Chinese socialist modernity can be discussed in many ways, in this essay I address only one aspect: the modernization of rural women (focusing specifically on the female tractor driver) in the socialist mode of agricultural production in China from 1949 to 1964.¹

¹ It should be noted that there were precedents in experimental socialist modernity long before the Communist Party took power in 1949. The “rural modernity” in the 1930s Ding County experiment was an example (Zhang 2013).

Modernity and technology enable each other. Technology is not only the material expression of modernity, it also actively shapes it. As Karl Marx (1963: 92) put it, each age has its own iconic machine: “The hand-mill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam-mill society with the industrial capitalists.” In Marx’s historical-materialist formulation, the machine is both the material dimension of a given society and its ideological articulation.

Adding to Marx’s list of key machines, I see the tractor as characteristic of socialist society. Although tractors were also popular in the West in the 1950s, they did not assume the important economic, political, cultural, symbolic, and emotional connotations they had in socialist countries, where the tractor was fetishized in agricultural collectivization and mechanization campaigns as the most modern machine. The tractor is arguably among the most important motifs in socialist narratives. As Katerina Clark writes, it was the “dominant cultural symbol for Soviet society,” where, “purring

contentedly," it stood for the Soviet state. The individual citizen was thus a "part" of the machine-state, namely "a ball-bearing in the tractor" (Clark 1981: 94–95). Because of the centrality of the tractor to it, Soviet socialist realism was dubbed by Western critics as variations of "boy meets tractor," "girl meets tractor," or "boy meets girl, girl meets tractor, boy gets both tractor and girl" (Clark 1981: 183). The fetishization of tractors and tractor girls emerged in other socialist countries as well: reports about Czech, Cuban, Romanian, Albanian, and North Korean tractors and tractor girls frequently appeared in Chinese media during the socialist decades. The Korean "tractor dance" (*tuolaji wu*), a pas de deux featuring a tractor girl and a tractor boy was introduced to socialist China (Anon. 1951). It was also a common practice for technologically advanced countries to give their homemade tractors as presents to other socialist and underdeveloped capitalist countries such as Italy (Anon. 1950), generating what I call "tractor diplomacy," not unlike the "panda diplomacy" of today.

The tractor, dubbed the "iron ox" (*tieniu*), was even more important in the Chinese context because of the relative backwardness of rural China at that time. As William Hinton (1970: 45) puts it, "Tractors had become a symbol of all that was new and bright in the countryside. The 'iron ox' would draw in its wake a whole new world. A shimmering aura of prestige and progress enveloped mechanized farming and drew young people as a magnet draws filings." Chinese peasants usually drove oxen to till the land, and the tractor was such a new machine that many peasants in the socialist era had not even heard of it. As Edward Friedman, Paul Pickowicz, and Mark Selden (1991: 142) recall, when a socialist local cadre found it difficult to explain the term *tuolaji* (tractor) to the peasants, he would simply say that "tractor" meant the future of China, because the slogan at that time was "Soviet's today will be our tomorrow."

The tractor was especially indispensable in the large-scale collectivization, mechanization, and modernization of agriculture in socialist China. Some leaders, such as Liu Shaoqi, held that tractors and other machinery were

the prerequisite for agricultural collectivization: “Only with the availability of machines shall we be able to run collective farms . . . mechanization is a prerequisite to collectivization” (in Stavis 1978: 62). According to Kang Chao, there were three types of tractor ownership in socialist China: by state mechanized farms; by agricultural machine stations, called tractor stations before 1959; and by agricultural cooperatives or communes and research institutions. From the late 1940s on, state farms in northeast and north China owned the majority of the tractors because they were involved in the campaign to reclaim land in the desolate frontier areas. The large-scale land-reclamation campaign was interrupted after 1958 because of famine and economic crisis, but the government continued to provide these state farms with tractors until 1963. Before 1953 state farms had about ninety percent of the tractors, but after 1964 the percentage dropped to less than thirty percent (Chao 1970: 105–110). It should be said that China did not produce its own tractors until 1958; before that, all tractors were imported from twelve countries (mainly the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe). The most popular was Stalin-80 (ninety-three horsepower), produced in the Soviet Union (Chao 1970: 105–110). During the land-reclamation campaign in the 1950s, only these powerful tank-like Soviet tractors were suitable for tilling the vast virgin land in the frontier areas of China. My focus in this essay is on the frontier state farms.

Machines, technology, and modernity are usually associated with masculinity. As Rita Felski (1995: 2) points out, modernity is often coded in masculine terms. For instance, Goethe’s Faust, a scholar and scientist, is the exemplar of the modern age, whereas Gretchen, whom Faust seduces, is relegated to the sphere of a tradition that Faust, the autonomous modern subject, must transcend. Because women are associated with tradition in the masculine discourse of modernity, they are excluded from the realm of technology, the most cutting-edge dimension of modernity. As Judy Wajcman (1991: 17) says, “Technology, like science, is seen as deeply implicated in the masculine project of the domination and control

of women and nature.” Technology is masculine, not only because the production of technology is dominated by men, but also because the use of technology, especially heavy machines in the public sphere, usually excludes women.

Francesca Bray (1997: 5) discusses the gendered nature of the use of technology in traditional China. In late imperial China, men shouldered the responsibility of farming in the fields, whereas women stayed at home to weave. The gendered agricultural work not only associated women and men with different machines (loom as feminine vs. plow/ox as masculine), but also assigned these machines a set of gendered roles and social morals. Weaving in the domestic sphere, regarded as “womanly work,” was not only a necessity for the economic well-being of the family, it helped to protect (with the help of the foot-binding practice) women’s morality from the threat of corruption by the public sphere.

Determined to modernize rural women by transforming the traditional relationship between them and the domestic sphere, Mao advocated that women, like their male counterparts, should work in the public sphere. Mao’s idea had a theoretical basis. Marx and Engels once conflated capitalism with patriarchal oppression in the family system: in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Engels tellingly states that men’s social production in the public sphere made people denigrate women’s work in the domestic sphere, and that to achieve gender equality, women needed to join socialist production in the public sphere (M. Yang 1999: 37–38). In socialist discourse, the traditional family and family-based production were conveniently and strategically regarded as the site of patriarchal oppression and sexual discrimination. Lenin himself said that “paternalism is a product of a small-producer economy” (in Croll 1978: 275); in his time, “the family was considered the institutional embodiment of tradition and hence counterrevolutionary” (Andors 1983: 7). In a similar vein, Mao once described traditional China as “a country of small-scale production and one dominated by the patriarchal system” (in Croll 1978:

275). He pointed out that the traditional small-scale production centered on the family was the root of patriarchal oppression of women, and only socialist collective production could liberate women from that oppression. Consequently, during the agricultural collectivization campaign in the 1950s, women were encouraged to venture outside and participate in production in the public sphere; in this way, men and women did the same work outside the home and should theoretically be equal. Many posters, films, and other cultural representations featured women doing farm work and even using men's machines (ox/plow and tractor) in the fields. An extreme example of this gender equality was the female tractor driver.

Gender Equality: The Female Tractor Driver as Icon of Socialist Modernity in the Early 1950s

The fetish of the female tractor driver originated in the Soviet Union. The first Soviet female tractor driver to be lauded in the Russian media was Pasha Angelina (a.k.a. Praskovia Nikitichna Angelina), who began driving a tractor as part of the agricultural collectivization movement of the 1930s (Zhang Min 1953). Following her call for “one hundred thousand women—on the tractors!” in 1938, some 200,000 female tractor drivers could be found around the Soviet Union (Zhang Zhuli 2008: 29). Pasha Angelina was made even more famous by the film *She Defends the Motherland* (1943), directed by Friedrich Ermler. Pasha, the protagonist, is a champion tractor driver who joins the anti-Nazi resistance and even drives a tank in the struggle. Another well-known Soviet film featuring a female tractor driver was *Tractor Drivers* (1939), which revolves around a romance between a female and a male tractor driver on a state farm.

Films, literature, reports, and images of Soviet female tractor drivers were introduced to socialist China and exerted far-reaching influence. Soviet films often reached the peasants through mobile projection teams, and audiences' responses were frequently published in mainstream media. After watching the Soviet film *Tractor Drivers*, for instance, a village

women's representative expressed her admiration of the Soviet female tractor driver and decided to learn from her to better manage the Mutual-Aid Teams (*huzhu zu*) in her village so that Chinese peasants could live the same happy life as their Soviet brothers (Xie Chongde 1953).

Images of Soviet female tractor drivers also played an important role in the construction of Chinese female tractor drivers like Liang Jun, who became the first Chinese female tractor driver in socialist state media. It was said that after Liang Jun watched *She Defends the Motherland*, she decided to become a tractor driver herself: "I want to be China's Pasha. I want to be a tractor driver to dedicate my youth to my motherland" (Hao 2001: 42–43). When Liang Jun read the news that Pasha Angelina founded the first Women's Tractor Team in the Soviet Union in 1933, she established the first Women's Tractor Team in China on June 3, 1950. The team was composed of three tractors and eleven women—five tractor drivers, five assistants, and one ideology advisor. Their task was to till the wasteland during the land-reclamation campaign. The number of teammates grew to twenty-four in February 1952 (Pei 1987: 38–39).

Liang Jun was a peasant girl born in 1930 in Heilongjiang. When the Communist Party liberated her hometown in 1947, she went to a rural Teachers' School in Dedu County, Heilongjiang. In 1948, the school dispatched Liang Jun and two male students to attend a three-month tractor-driving course. After graduation, at the age of eighteen, Liang Jun became the first female tractor driver in China. In October 1949, Liang Jun joined the Communist Party. In September 26, 1950, she attended the Conference of National Model Workers, where she was received by Chairman Mao.

Liang Jun was glorified in state propaganda, her image appearing in newspapers, magazines, posters, and films. Her image on the cover of the August 1950 issue of *The People's Pictorial* (*Renmin huabao*) assumes masculine qualities (fig. 1). Positioned on the left side of the photograph, she is wearing a green army jacket and blue overalls, the typical dress for



Figure 1. Liang Jun and her assistant.
From *The People's Pictorial*, August 1950.

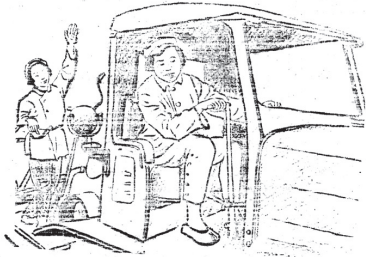
heavy-industry workers. Her short hair is tucked under an army cap, thus eliminating her hair as a marker of female identity. Her face looks broad and manly, and her expression is assertive and strong. She controls the steering wheel of the tractor and stares at the camera, indicating that she is the protagonist in this picture. The assistant sitting beside her is also wearing a worker's blue overalls and cap; instead of looking at the camera, however, she looks out beyond the frame. The low angle of the photograph lends a monumental quality to the two female tractor drivers and magnifies the sky in the background. Merging them with the immense sky seems to suggest Mao's famous phrase advocating gender equality: "Women hold up half of the sky."²

² The masculine qualities of the female tractor driver were later pushed to extremes during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976).

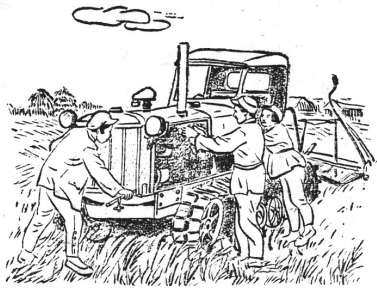
Liang Jun's case was part of what Tina Mai Chen calls the "female-kind-first" (*nǚjie diyī*) phenomenon, which refers to the promotion of model women who became firsts in their fields—first female tractor driver, train driver, welder, engineer, scientist, etc.³ These model women represented gender equality, as suggested by the catchphrase used to glorify almost all of these female-kind-first women: "Whatever men can do, women can do too" (Chen 2003a: 279). Usually these women were represented with characteristics common to a masculine ideal. In 1949, a linked-picture story version of Liang Jun's life appeared in *New Chinese Women* (*Xin Zhongguo funü*) (fig. 2). In these pictures, Liang Jun has a broad face and masculine facial features, with extremely short hair tucked under the worker's cap, although showing more than in the *The People's Pictorial* cover just discussed. Liang Jun's masculinity was typical of the female-kind-first women at that time.

³ These model women can be compared with Rosie the Riveter in the wartime United States. For Rosie the Riveter, see Honey 1984.

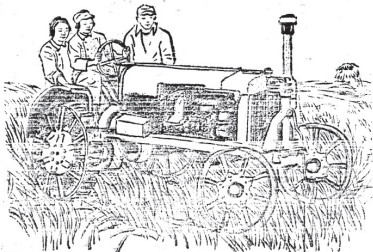
These model women's masculinized, stalwart, assertive, and desexualized bodies were very important in the discourse of socialist modernity, an extension of the new socialist nation and the very antithesis of old China, often represented as the "sick man of East Asia." Tina Mai Chen (2003a: 274) writes that "their physical form represented metonymically the power of new China." In socialist narratives, women usually functioned



① 一九四八年，梁軍抱着偉大的願望，走進了省委開辦的拖拉機訓練班。在學習中，由於她積極努力，克服了許多困難，很快就當了拖拉機的練習生。



② 梁軍經常想：“為國家貢獻自己的力量，需要學習一門技術”。因此，在機師講解拆卸機器時，她細心地聽、看，一遍又一遍地試驗，不會不懂就問。



③ 由於她專心鑽研，不恥下問，兩個月的學習，她全部掌握，是極現成的技術，成了大家的模範，男女同志都向她學習。



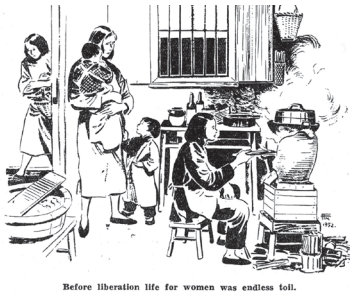
女拖拉機手梁軍

高 崗

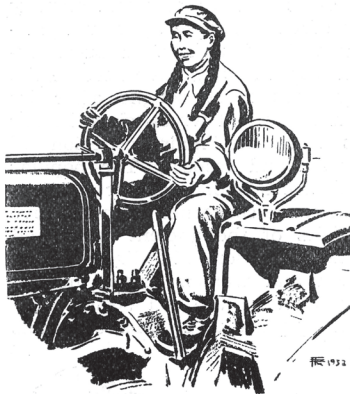
④ 梁軍生在一個貧農家裏，為了生活，曾幹地主的雇工，受過苦。不久以前，她是黑龍江省高等農業專科學校的學生，今年畢業，現任黑龍江機械化農場中的女拖拉機手。

Figure 2. The Female Tractor Driver Liang Jun. From *New Chinese Women*, issue 5 in 1949.

as a trope for the nation. Whereas the feminine, vulnerable, and foot-bound women in the domestic sphere symbolized the feudal, backward, and weak China, these robust model women in the public sphere were icons of socialist New China rising on the global stage. In other words, the former belonged to the realm of tradition and the latter to the sphere of (socialist) modernity. An article entitled “Chinese Women and Children,” published in *China Reconstructs* in 1952, shows how the transformation of women reflects this contrast between traditional and modern socialist China. The traditional women before 1949 represented the weakness of old China, which provided an excuse for foreign powers to invade China. In New China, however, women were now equal to men, and the nation could defend itself against imperialism (Tze 1952: 20).



Before liberation life for women was endless toil.



In China today women drive combines on state-owned farms.

Figure 3. Traditional women versus female tractor driver. From *China Reconstructs* March-April 1952.

The illustrations in the *China Reconstructs* article especially demonstrate the role of the female tractor driver in representing New China (fig. 3a, 3b). Before 1949, women were confined to the domestic sphere, attending to household chores and rearing children: “Before liberation life for women was endless toil.” However, in New China, women can drive tractors and combines on state farms. In these representations, the domestic sphere in the family is the site of tradition and oppression, whereas the social sphere outside the home is the site of emancipation and gender equality. The difference between old/traditional China and new/modern China is further exemplified by the contrasting physiques of the traditional women in the first image and the female tractor driver in the second. Pictured on a tractor, the tractor driver’s face is broad and coarse, and her body is strong and robust. She wears a loose suit and a worker’s cap. Her body is fully covered, devoid of sexuality. Without the two braids, we hardly tell that she is a woman. She has a happy countenance, evidently satisfied with her job. In contrast, the traditional women are portrayed in a kitchen. The two younger women on the left wear cheongsam (*qipao*), which outlines their feminine contours and exposes their legs. Their sexuality is suggested not only by their exposed legs but by the presence of children.

These women's faces are tiny and smooth, and they have slim figures. They look very feminine, but their expressions suggest unhappiness. The woman in the middle of the picture is attending two children; the woman on the left is carrying a hamper of dirty clothes and is about to enter the kitchen to wash them. The older woman on the right is probably a servant or a mother (in-law) cooking for the family. The backwardness of these traditional women highlights the modernness of the female tractor driver and, by extension, socialist New China.⁴

In the discourse of socialist modernity, the "privilege of backwardness," proposed by Marxists from Leon Trotsky to Mao Zedong, is a very important concept (Lin 2006: 25). According to Chun Lin, instead of condemning backwardness, the rhetoric of socialist modernity finds in backwardness opportunities for dramatic modernization. Karl Marx once considered the possibility of providing the most backward village with the most advanced technology so that it could make the leap from precapitalism to communism by skipping the middle stages. In a similar vein, Mao proclaimed that the most backward economy can be most easily modernized and transformed into socialism (Lin 2006: 24–25). "Backwardness" refers not only to material conditions; it has ideological connotations as well. In socialist China, "backwardness" was usually associated with traditional and feudal ideas and practices before 1949. Transforming these backward elements in both material and ideological terms can thus testify to the party-state's progressiveness and legitimacy in bringing about socialist modernity.

The fetishization of the female tractor driver as an icon of socialist modernity was predicated on this rhetoric of the "privilege of backwardness" that was constructed through an intersection of concerns related to gender, age, and geographical location. In a traditional patriarchal system, women usually had to depend on their fathers or husbands for economic well-being because men owned the family's wealth and property; their economic dependence made them obedient to their fathers and husbands. Women could be economically secure only after they had sons. Because

⁴ The novel *Female Tractor Drivers* (Nü tuolajishou, 1954) presents a similar contrast between old-fashioned and socialist new women. Chen Yuqin, a peasant girl, is a tractor driver on a state farm near her village. When she and other women drive the tractor in front of the villagers, the old-fashioned women feel uneasy: "When old women saw these energetic young girls, they had complicated feelings. In the past, they just busied themselves in the kitchen. They were beaten, bullied, and looked down upon. Thinking about the past, they felt envious. However, when they saw these young girls, who could speak and behave like men, they also felt happy for them" (Jiang 1954: 28).

of this gender inequality, women, especially young women living in rural villages, were usually the poorest in Chinese society, generating what Diana Pearce (1978: 28) calls, in another context, the “feminization of poverty.” In addition, because of the sexual division of labor between the domestic and public spheres, rural women, who were rarely exposed to outside ideas, were usually regarded as bearers of tradition. In socialist China, no one was more backward (thus potentially more progressive) than a peasant girl living in a village. The socialist discourse exploited this idea of young women’s “backwardness” and transformed them into the ideal site for radical modernization. Naturally, many narratives about the female tractor driver sharply contrasted her backward life before 1949 and her modern life after liberation. For instance, in a 1954 article entitled “Peasant Girl Transformed into Farm Leader,” the female tractor driver was an extremely poor peasant exploited by a landlord, but burning with a desire to avenge the injustice of her situation. After she joined the Communist Party, she received an education and became a tractor driver at the Chihung State Farm in Shijiazhuang, Hebei. She was so progressive that she became the leader of the state farm (Chi 1954).

Geographical location in the construction of backwardness was pushed to extremes during the land-reclamation campaign. Usually modernity is associated with cities, because modernization is typically associated with industrialization and urbanization, but the socialist discourse of the privilege of backwardness located the site of modernity in the countryside. In socialist China, the countryside was backward, but the desolate and unpopulated frontier areas were even more backward. The presence in this wasteland of the tractor, the most advanced agricultural technology at that time, thus suggested radical modernization and a great leap forward to socialist modernity. In the documentary film *The Female Tractor Driver* (Nü tuolajishou, 1950), featuring Liang Jun, the narrator describes Liang Jun’s hometown this way: “There is vast grassland and a span of unexplored and potentially fertile land that extends endlessly to the horizon . . . people call this desolate place Big Northern Wasteland (Beidahuang).” It is precisely

because the Big Northern Wasteland was backward that Liang Jun was determined to transform it into a fertile land. As the slogan at that time put it, these tractor drivers' mission was to "transform the Big Northern Wasteland into a Big Northern Barn (Beidacang)" with their tractors.

Intertwined with these notions of gender, age, and geographical location in constructing the discourse of the privilege of backwardness was the issue of ethnicity. Ethnic minorities, who usually live in desolate frontier areas, were regarded as backward compared to the so-called civilized Han; equipping them with modern agricultural technology thus represented a great stride toward socialist modernity. In the socialist era, there were many reports in the media about ethnic minority female tractor drivers. Liang Jun herself had two Mongolian disciples—Saren and Suoyaoerma—who came to her to learn how to drive a tractor because they were on a sacred mission to modernize Inner Mongolia. As they told Liang Jun: "We were sent here by the Mongolian people. We want to be the first female tractor drivers in New Mongolia" (Anon. 2007: 49). Within half a year, the two Mongolian girls became tractor drivers. There were also reports about Tibetan, Uyghur, Achang, Li, Ewenki, and other ethnic female tractor drivers.⁵ For instance, right after the Tibetan uprising in 1959, there were timely reports about Tibetan female tractor drivers. According to these narratives, tradition stipulated that Tibetan women should not touch the plow and till the land; otherwise, yaks would die, lands would become barren, and disasters would befall the family. However, the Party sought to eliminate this bias against women as part of its subsequent reform of Tibet. Tibetan women assumed equal rights with men, allowing them to till the land with plows and even tractors.⁶ For instance, on January 6, 1960, a news report entitled "A Tibetan Female Tractor Driver" was published in *People's Daily*. According to this report, Danzengcuomao was a serf abused by a serf owner. Her life took a different course after the 1959 reform, when she was sent to learn how to drive a tractor. When she came back to till the virgin land, she was celebrated as an icon of socialist modernity in Tibet.⁷

⁵ The film *Five Golden Flowers* (Wuduo jinhua, 1959) features a Bai ethnic female tractor driver.

⁶ Literary texts touched on the transformation of Tibet after 1959. A poem entitled "To the (Tibetan) Female Plover" (1961) reads: "Who said that women should not till the land, and men not gather the grass? We should eradicate these backward habits. Who said that the land tilled by girls will not grow crops? You will have a bumper harvest to shame him! Oh, the female plover . . . Your determined eyes are burning with flames that will destroy feudal thoughts. Oh, the female plover, you have planted silver and gold with your steps!" Another poem, "To the (Tibetan) Female Tractor Driver," also contrasts her life before and after 1959: "The girl used to be a poor milkmaid. She went to the state farm with the spring wind. Although the grassland was vast three years ago, there was no place for her. The Party gave her ideals and strength, and even entrusted her with the 'iron yak.' From then on, she will create golden barns with her milkmaid's hands" (Wang Chengdong 1961: 78–79, 86–87).

⁷ Wang Boqi 1960. In sociohistorical reality, the most famous Tibetan female tractor driver was Dingzhenzhuoma, who was a serf oppressed by her serf owner when she was little. According to her memoir, it was only when Tibet was liberated that she began to live a life as a human instead of as a dog. Dingzhenzhuoma and nine other Tibetan women were sent to learn how to drive a tractor so that they could have a role to play in agricultural modernization and in reclaiming the virgin land of Tibet. See Yang/Zhang 1995.

Softened Bodies: Picturing Female Tractor Drivers, 1956–1964

Despite the “privilege of backwardness” in socialist discourse, to become a female tractor driver was extremely difficult and remained merely an ideal for women in real life. Perhaps unsurprisingly, women in the 1950s often received contradictory messages. The social transformation outside the traditional family was important for women’s emancipation, but society’s inability to provide enough job opportunities for women often resulted in the reassertion of traditional values that were officially regarded as the site of women’s oppression. This phenomenon became especially prominent beginning in 1956: “With a contracting labor market in the period from late 1956 to the Great Leap, attention focused on women’s domestic role. Pressure was even exerted on women cadres to retire, although they were reluctant to do so” (Andors 1983: 46). Under such circumstances, female tractor drivers could not flourish forever. The ideal masculine female tractor driver who stood on equal footing with men proved to be a transient phenomenon.

Cultural representations responded to this changing reality and reflected on the female tractor driver phenomenon from a different perspective. In terms of physical appearance, the female tractor drivers represented in the media from the late 1950s to 1964 look softer and more feminine than their counterparts in the early 1950s. For instance, the People’s Bank of China publicized the third set of RMB banknotes in 1962, with the one yuan note featuring Liang Jun (fig. 4). Compared with previous representations of her from the early 1950s (figs. 1 and 2), Liang Jun’s body here looks much slimmer. Her face is smaller and smoother, radiant with feminine charm. She wears overalls and a white shirt, but does not wear the typical worker’s cap so that her hair flies freely in the wind. Her position in driving the tractor shows an elegant sense of control. The tractor she drives is no longer the monstrous Soviet tractor, but one of the smaller makes then being produced in China.

In November 1959, Liang Jun became the first Chinese worker to drive



Figure 4. Liang Jun driving the first tractor of China, RMB banknote, 1962.

an East Is Red tractor, the first to be produced in socialist China (CCTV 2009) and sent to state farms in Heilongjiang.⁸ This glorious moment was captured in a photo (fig. 5) and later on the one yuan banknote (CCTV 2009). The image was circulated globally, symbolizing to the world the arrival of an indigenous socialist modernity in rural China. East Is Red tractors were probably the most well-known tractors made in China; they were made by the First Tractor-Manufacturing Factory of China, founded in Luoyang, Henan in 1955. Soviet experts played an important role in establishing the factory and producing the tractors (Anon. 1959a, 1959b; He 1959; Dao 1959; Yang Ligong 1959; Fu 1959). With the birth of East Is Red tractors, numerous photos, poems, and reports emerged in the media to eulogize the tractors, the women who drove them, and the factory that produced them (Xiang 1959; Xie Juezai 1959; Bing 1959; Li 1959). Other brands of tractors, such as Giant Dragon (Julong) and Red River (Honghe), were made for different types of terrain (Anon. 1958, 1960).

In the early 1950s, visual representations in the media focused exclusively on the female tractor driver. From the late 1950s on, such representations make more prominent the female tractor driver's feminine role in the domestic sphere. For instance, the poster entitled "Mama Arrives on a Tractor" (1960) is set in a vast plain, but it is a feminine space dominated

⁸ Anon. 1959c. There might be earlier experiments of tractor-making in socialist China. On December 17, 1950, a tractor named Resist America, Support Korea (*Kang Mei yuan Chao hao*) was made in Taiyuan, Shanxi Province. But no more news about this make can be found, so it must have been discontinued (Wu 1951).



Fig 5. Photograph of Liang Jun driving the first tractor of China in 1959. From CCTV.

by women and children (fig. 6). A group of female tractor drivers comes to a kindergarten to pick up their chubby toddlers. Like the representation of Liang Jun on the one yuan bill, these tractor drivers look feminine. The woman in the foreground of this poster does not wear the typical unisex overalls for workers; instead, she wears more ordinary clothes. Under her blue jacket, she even wears a pink sweater, which reinforces her femininity. Her face is softened by rouge, and a pink hairpin adds another touch of femininity. She looks much slimmer than the muscular female tractor drivers of the early 1950s, with one hand holding the steering wheel and one hand stretching out to lovingly greet the children. Even the tractors in this poster have a feminine quality: they are all red, small, and cute, in contrast to the gigantic tank-like Soviet tractors in the 1950s representations. With these small East Is Red tractors, the female tractor drivers' bodies do not need to be exaggerated and masculinized to aesthetically match the monstrous



Figure 6. Mama Comes on a Tractor. 1960. From Landsberger.

Soviet tractors as they did in the early 1950s representations. In this poster, the tractor drivers assume double roles and move between the public and domestic spheres, with the tractor, ironically, as their vehicle. The emphasis on the tractor drivers' maternal role contrasts sharply with the early desexualized and virginal female tractor drivers, who bravely leave their families to engage in agricultural production and who function as an antithesis to traditional women surrounded by children (fig. 3).

Generally speaking, female tractor drivers in the early 1950s were often featured individually, monumentally, and heroically in the public working space, but in the posters and illustrations of the late 1950s and early 1960s, as demonstrated in "Mama Arrives on a Tractor," they are frequently positioned in a relationship with the domestic sphere to highlight their maternal and womanly roles. In a poster entitled "Spring Plowing," the female tractor driver is positioned in the background, rather than in the usual foreground (fig. 7). Her face is barely discernible and her body appears small under the vast blue sky. A group of children is situated in the foreground, their faces turned toward the tractor driver, who looks at them and seems to be talking to them. Rather than featuring the female tractor driver as a detached and monumental hero at work, this poster emphasizes her relationship and interaction with people outside the work space. Although the poster does not explicitly state the relationship between the tractor driver and the children, it is possible that she is the mother of some of them, or a maternal and nurturing figure for them. This was true of ethnic minority female tractor drivers, who were portrayed as equally skilled at delivering lambs and driving tractors (Bao 1961). An essay published in the *People's Daily* in December 1958 even advocated that "it's more important to take care of children than tractors." Ambitious young women were encouraged to take nursery jobs, rather than become tractor drivers (Dai 1958).

Positioned in a relationship with the domestic sphere, the muscular, robust, and coarse bodies of the early 1950s representations are softened or



Figure 7. Spring Plowing, 1962. From Landsberger.

downplayed. From the material sociohistorical perspective, the large-scale land-reclamation campaign in the remote borderlands had been slowed down or even suspended since the late 1950s and female tractor drivers had to work in their own or nearby villages closer to home. Also, with the deteriorating Sino-Soviet relationship after 1956, domestically made small tractors (East Is Red) gradually replaced the gigantic Soviet tractors that were more suitable for tilling barren fields on state farms during the land-reclamation campaign of the early 1950s. From the ideological perspective, the original aggressive and optimistic ideal of the robust and manlike female tractor driver guided by the slogan of “whatever men can do, women can do too” was challenged in implementation. One issue was physiological difference. Tractor-driving called for tremendous physical strength and stamina that women, with their menstruation, pregnancies, and maternal needs, often could not maintain. Neglecting these biological differences often led to physical exhaustion, disease, and even deaths of women workers.⁹ There were moral concerns as well, because female tractor drivers’ mobility, enabled by the tractors, might lead to immoral behavior. As Friedman, Pickowicz, and Selden (1991: 168) point out, “The phenomenon of women tractor drivers was short-lived. Tractor drivers often had to work around the clock and to travel to distant places. In China’s countryside women could do neither without incurring suspicions of immoral behavior. Most of the trained women drivers quickly found themselves back at collective field work.” These material and conceptual changes are partially reflected in the visual representations of the female tractor driver in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

⁹ For the contestation between the radical ideal of sexual equality, which erases physiological difference, and the Marxist maternalist conception of sexual equality, which emphasized physiological difference and women’s particular needs in late 1950s China, see Manning 2006.

Gender Difference: Female Tractor Drivers and Socialist Patriarchs, 1956–1964

Whereas posters, photos, and magazine covers and illustrations could capture only the most typical and iconic moment of the life of a female tractor driver, longer narrative forms, such as novels and films, could

develop a multifaceted life. For instance, although men are usually absent in the visual representations discussed here, they assume a very important role in literary and cinematic narratives about the female tractor drivers, what I call the “tractor genre,” which emerged prominently in the mid-1950s. Examination of these narratives reveals the hidden stories and delineates a more comprehensive picture of these female tractor drivers.

The novel *Young Tractor Drivers* (Qingnian tuolajishou, 1956) revolves around a young tractor driver’s pursuit of a female tractor driver on a state farm close to the Yellow River. The protagonists in this novel are the villagers Little Tank (Xiao Tanke) and Xiaola. Xiaola’s mother dies right after she is born, so her grandmother gives her to Little Tank’s mother to raise as his future bride. Five or six years later, Xiaola’s father remarries, but his wife is barren so he asks Xiaola to return and live with them. After she returns to her father’s home, her stepmother begins to abuse her to such a degree that she attempts suicide. She is later sold to a landlord. When the People’s Liberation Army comes, she reports the landlord to the Army. As a result, the landlord is sentenced to death and Xiaola becomes a representative of liberated women, participating in the land reform and later joining the land-reclamation campaign, during which she reencounters Little Tank. They fall in love and finally get married.

Little Tank is the patriarch in both the public and the domestic spheres. His manly authority over Xiaola is first exemplified by his control of the narrative. The novel has two narrators: the frame narrator is Bai Wei, the author of the novel, and the second narrator is Little Tank. Little Tank portrays himself as a masculine, competent, and confident man. In contrast, Xiaola is silent, mild, and incompetent as a tractor driver. The image of a submissive female tractor driver stands in sharp contrast to the strong and superior women characters in many socialist narratives who appropriate political power from the Party and dominate their weaker husbands and male colleagues, whom Yue Meng (1993: 132–136) calls “male political infants.” Unlike the desexualized and defeminized female tractor

drivers characteristic of socialist asceticism in the early 1950s, Xiaola is the object of Little Tank's abiding desire. Little Tank positions himself as "her protector" and instructs her in driving the tractor. Although Little Tank clearly likes Xiaola, he nonetheless shows contempt for her driving skills: "I can see that when Xiaola drives the tractor, it looks like she is skiing, dancing wildly in the fields. She is not tilling the land, but just dashing forward impetuously. Whoever sees it will feel scared" (Bai 1956: 60). To demonstrate that female tractor drivers are as competent as male drivers, Xiaola and other female tractor drivers decide to hold a competition with Little Tank's team. However, the girls cannot keep up with the boys. Even worse, Xiaola's tractor breaks down and, despite her best efforts, she cannot fix it. Desperate, Xiaola weeps bitterly, like a vulnerable child. Little Tank shows up and promptly fixes the problem, at which point Xiaola softens toward him and accepts his romantic advances. In taming the tractor, the tractor boy also tames the tractor girl. After they get married, Xiaola remains submissive to Little Tank; this is revealed when Little Tank talks to Xiaola rudely on the phone. Hearing it, Pei Shuhua, herself also a tractor driver, sympathizes with Xiaola and addresses the author of the novel: "In the world, there is no such boorish fellow! Comrade Bai, you don't find such people in novels, do you? How can anyone talk to his newlywed bride so rudely" (Bai 1956: 5).

Xiaola's identity transformation from a child bride to a tractor driver is both progressive and regressive. To enter the realm of socialist production, she has to renounce her biological family, which in Mao's theories is the site of patriarchal oppression. However, by marrying Little Tank, Xiaola ends up resuming her role as a child bride, the very embodiment of feudalism in socialist discourse. In many socialist narratives, the family, especially the husband's family, is usually the site of tradition and oppression that socialist women need to transcend. Many progressive socialist narratives are about young women's (especially the child bride's) struggle against their husbands and mothers-in-law. A typical example is *The Liberation of Meng Xiangying*

(Meng Xiangying fanshen, 1945), in which the young daughter-in-law, Meng Xiangying, fights against her evil husband and mother-in-law, who try to prevent her from participating in socialist production outside the family. In the end, Meng Xiangying moves out to live by herself so that she can serve the Party and state wholeheartedly beyond the confines of her family (Du 2013). Another example is Liang Jun, the acclaimed first female tractor driver of China. Like Xiaola, she was a child bride, but, with the guidance of the Party, she rejected her traditional role and joined in socialist production. The novel *Young Tractor Drivers* reverses the master narrative embodied in the stories of such female tractor drivers as Meng Xiangying and Liang Jun.

The romantic and professional relationship between the male and female tractor drivers delineated in *Young Tractor Drivers* is, however, typical of the many tractor narratives at that time. A feature film entitled *A Withered Tree Coming to Life Again* (Kumu fengchun, 1961) can serve as an example. Directed by Zheng Junli, the film was adapted from a spoken drama script with the same title.¹⁰ The female protagonist, an orphaned girl named Sister Bitterness (Kumeizi), was originally a child bride of the male protagonist, Brother Winter (Dongge). They leave their schistosomiasis-plagued hometown, but get separated in another village. To survive, Sister Bitterness stays there and marries a local villager, who later dies of schistosomiasis. After liberation, Brother Winter comes to the local village as a tractor driver and encounters Sister Bitterness, who is unfortunately infected with schistosomiasis. With the help of Brother Winter and the new socialist government, Sister Bitterness recovers and marries Brother Winter, who teaches her to drive a tractor and contribute to socialist production. As in *Young Tractor Drivers*, the male tractor driver, who functions as husband and coach, assumes unquestionable authority over the female tractor driver, both at home and at work.¹¹ Like Xiaola, Sister Bitterness undergoes at once a progressive and a regressive journey: she is transformed into a socialist tractor driver, but in marrying Brother

¹⁰ For the life and career of Zheng Junli, see Pickowicz 2006.

¹¹ A novella entitled *Summer Night* (Xiaye, 1959) has a similar plot. In this story, the boy wins both the tractor and the peasant female tractor driver by demonstrating his intelligence and education (although not the supreme driving skills that Little Tank has). He is a Branch Secretary of the Communist Youth League and reads a lot of books. See Wang Wenshi 2004. Another novella, entitled *Silver Apricot and the Tractor Driver* (Yinxing he tuolajishou, 1960), tells of a girl named Silver Apricot who wants to be a tractor driver but cannot because of her lack of professional knowledge. She ends up marrying a tractor boy. See Zou 1961. A feature film entitled *Malan Flower Blooms* (Malan huakai, 1956) tells how a housewife is transformed into a tractor driver under the patient guidance of male tractor drivers, including her husband.

Winter she fulfills her original role as a child bride, a role that would normally not be part of socialist discourse. As such, the story embodies a circular pattern, rather than the typical linear narrative about women's liberation in socialist China.

The female tractor driver's inadequacy and vulnerability are pushed to extremes in the novel *Daughter of the Army* (*Jundui de nǚ'er*), which revolves around a failed female tractor driver. The author, Deng Pu, began to write the novel in the late 1950s, but it wasn't published until 1963. The story is set right after the Korean War in the early 1950s. The protagonist is a girl named Liu Haiying, who lives in a village in Hunan. Her mother is the only teacher in the village, and her father was a communist who died in the civil war when Haiying was just three years old. Before his death, he left his wife an unfinished letter in which he highlighted the role tractors will have in socialist China: "Old China is just like a broken boat in the storm. Our child will live in a new era, and the tractor will . . ." (Deng 1963: 2). Haiying's mother has never seen a real tractor, but she believes that the future of China will be shaped by tractors and thus encourages her daughter to become a driver: "Look, the broken boat in the storm already sank. Look, in New China the red flag of victory has already been raised. In our free land, little Haiying will drive a tractor and run wild. . ." (23). Under her parents' influence, Haiying becomes obsessed with the idea of driving a tractor. When the army comes to Changsha, the capital of Hunan, to recruit soldiers to reclaim wasteland in the Xinjiang Autonomous Region, Haiying joins up without hesitation and leaves her home village. This facet of the novel is based on true historical events: in the early 1950s, General Wang Zhen requested that the Hunan Party Secretary recruit female soldiers to support the modernization of Xinjiang; as a result, around 8,000 women from Hunan went to Xinjiang, and some of them became tractor drivers (fig. 8). The story of Liu Haiying is set in this sociohistorical context (Liao/Zheng 2006).



Figure 8. A Hunanese Female Tractor Driver in Xinjiang, early 1950s. From Liao/Zheng 2006.

Despite her intense desire to become a tractor driver, Haiying's multiply

disabled body prevents her from fulfilling her dream. The novel attributes Haiying's physical weakness to the old society: imprisoned with her parents when she is only three years old, she develops otitis media and arthritis from the bad conditions in the Guomindang prison. Later, Haiying is further disabled when defending socialist principles: on a winter day, in order to prevent a piece of collective property, a bundle of sticks bound together for use in construction, from being washed away by a flood, she twice jumps into the chilly river, rendering herself deaf as a result. Another night, when the state farm's cotton crop is threatened by a rainstorm, Haiying uses all her strength to open the sluice gate of the dam to keep the water from flooding the cotton field, and she passes out from the exertion. She wakes up paralyzed in a hospital.¹² Her paralysis functions as an allegory for the inadequacy of the female body. Feminist studies have found that disability is often associated with femininity, an idea that can be traced back to Aristotle, who regarded women as "mutilated males." Iris Marion Young therefore argues that "women in a sexist society are physically handicapped" (in Garland-Thomson 2006: 260).

However, with strong determination, Haiying recovers and can walk like a healthy woman. At this point, the reader might expect that after all these trials Haiying will finally fulfill her ambition and become a tractor driver. However, the novel abruptly ends with Haiying's happy, humble, and saintly renunciation of her tractor dream: "Different types of people do different jobs. Everybody has his or her own beloved job, because every job is oriented toward one destination and will eventually lead to that destination—socialism and communism. Our sky is also broad . . . not all people will become tractor drivers" (Deng 1963: 257). Haiying thus comes to recognize her role as just an ordinary "cog or wheel" of the socialist machine.

Haiying's case contrasts sharply with the story of a paralyzed male tractor driver in *Surging Flames: The Story of the Legless Tractor Driver Li Laicai* (Xiongxiang de huoyan: wujiao tuolajishou Li Laicai de gushi,

¹² Haiying's heroic deeds and the consequent disabilities drew from the story of a real woman named Wang Mengyun, who joined the land-reclamation campaign in Xinjiang in 1952 when she was just thirteen years old.

1957), based on a true story (Liu Baiyu 1957; Tian 1955). The protagonist is a male peasant named Li Laicai, whose family suffered tremendously at the hands of Japanese occupiers and local landlords. After liberation, Li Laicai joins in the Korean War. After a prolonged winter battle, he is so badly frostbitten that the doctors have to amputate his right leg and his left foot; he is sent back to China and is hospitalized. Although disabled, he still wants to become a tractor driver; he asks the doctor to cut off his left leg to match the length of his already amputated right leg so that he can use artificial limbs and better balance his body. Party leaders are very supportive and grant his request. In 1955 Li Laicai is sent to work in the Boai State Farm in Henan to reclaim a wasteland populated by wolves; there he becomes a successful tractor driver.

In the Maoist conception, healthy and robust bodies symbolize the prosperous nation, which should exclude disabled bodies. As a result, disability was almost a taboo in Maoist literature and art. *Surging Flames* and *The Daughter of the Army* were exceptions, but they demonstrate a double standard in transforming the female and male disabled body for the project of socialist modernity. Liu Haiying recovers from her disabilities, but still cannot become a tractor driver; she ends up renouncing her ambition. By contrast, although Li Laicai is paraplegic, he finally fulfills his dream and becomes a hero. Unlike Li Laicai, who is always confident in controlling and maneuvering the tractors, after she is disabled, Haiying develops a sense of insecurity before the tractor: "When she saw the tractor and smelled the familiar diesel oil, she hesitated, as if she suddenly became insignificant and the tractor looked like the solemn and terrifying Buddha in a temple. The sense of inferiority and humiliation made her hide outside the door, looking and daring not to enter that temple" (Deng 1963: 115).

Surging Flames and *The Daughter of the Army* call attention to what Tim Armstrong calls "prosthetic modernism." In discussing the role of technology in transforming the human body, Armstrong distinguishes "positive" and "negative" types of prostheses, which are bound up with

the “dynamics of modernity”: the negative prosthesis replaces a body part and covers a lack, and the positive prosthesis extends the human body and its capacities (Armstrong 1998: 78). In Li Laicai’s case, the artificial limbs may function as a negative prosthesis, but the negative effect is offset by another positive prosthesis—namely the tractor—which empowers his disabled body. In Haiying’s case, her hearing aid is a negative prosthesis, and its negative effect is intensified by the tractor, which makes her more ashamed of her disabled body. Armstrong further points out that positive and negative prostheses are contingent on gender politics: whereas masculinity is a positive prosthesis, femininity is a negative prosthesis associated with lack (Armstrong 1998: 89). In line with this, Haiying, who is already inadequate because of her sex, is fated to be associated with the negative prosthesis. Throughout the novel, she is positioned as a socialist singsong girl for the soldiers, because she is good at singing despite her weak body. The masculine profession of driving the tractor is an unobtainable ideal for her.

The Daughter of the Army was adapted into a film entitled *The Spark of Life* (Shengming de huohua, 1962), in which Haiying finally becomes a tractor driver through the patronage of the director of the state farm. Whereas in the novel the director is not an important character, in the film he becomes a surrogate father to Haiying, whose biological father has died. Haiying follows the director’s advice unreservedly. At the very beginning of the film, young men on the state farm interrupt Haiying’s work and ask her to dance for them, but she refuses. The director comes and educates her: “Do you mean that you don’t want to serve the people?” Hearing this, Haiying happily performs a Uyghur dance for the soldiers. The critical moment comes when Haiying, now paralyzed, believes she will never walk again. Again, the director consoles her, saying that because soldiers paralyzed during the Korean War (Li Laicai might be an example) can still contribute to socialist modernization, so can she. Enlightened and encouraged, Haiying becomes more determined and cheerful. In the end,

she recovers and can walk normally.

Although the film glamorizes the tractor, it also points to Haiying doing more womanly jobs. This double message was perceived, supported, and even appreciated by the audience at that time. In a film review, an audience member highlights the relationship between the two kinds of jobs. He notices Haiying's obsession with driving tractors, observing that when she takes a rest, her hands move automatically as if she were driving a tractor. When she is sick and cannot drive the tractor, she is "obsessed" with more womanly jobs, such as sewing clothes and gunnysacks for the male soldiers and being a telephone operator on night duty, without regarding them as inferior to tractor-driving. In Haiying's own words, "Why should I insist on driving the tractor? There are so many jobs on our state farm." The audience member explains that from these scenarios we can see that Haiying's tractor dream is not based on her own individual interest, but on the needs of socialist construction; that is why when she cannot drive the tractor, she does not mind doing other jobs needed for socialist construction. He concludes that Haiying's precious virtue is that she subordinates her personal aspiration to socialism (Pan 1963). Here we see how a traditional gendered division of labor is sanctioned under the guise of socialism.

The film ends with the double role of Haiying as a tractor driver and a socialist singsong girl and thus reasserts gender difference. When Haiying's mother learns that Haiying is deaf and paralyzed, she is so anxious that she goes to the state farm to see her. As a longtime family friend, the director accompanies her and invites her to watch a singing and dancing performance in the auditorium in celebration of the establishment of three tractor teams on the state farm. There the mother sees Haiying in costume singing and dancing confidently onstage, with thousands of people watching her (fig. 9a), and she realizes that Haiying has fully recovered. The camera then cuts to a field outside the auditorium: Haiying is suddenly transformed into a tractor driver, proudly driving and demonstrating

her driving skills in front of her mother and the director, who smiles and evaluates her as “a good child” (fig. 9b). In this way, the powerful female tractor driver is infantilized and rendered nonthreatening.

In addition to these domestic patriarchs (tractor boys and Party/state cadres), the Soviet Union functioned as an international patriarch, and was usually the symbolic source of identification for Chinese female tractor drivers. For instance, after Haiying is paralyzed (and Li Laicai loses his legs), she (and he) draws on Pavel Korchagin and the legless Soviet pilot Alexey Maresyev for encouragement. In real life, female tractor drivers such as Liang Jun, as well as other female-kind-first women, were usually trained by Soviet male technicians and advisors (Lu 1950; Sun 1950). China, figured by these model women, was thus feminized by the Soviet Big Brother (Chen 2003a: 284–288). In the documentary film *The Female Tractor Driver*, discussed earlier, Liang Jun delivers a public speech in front of a portrait of Stalin, thus symbolically reinforcing the relationship between Chinese female tractor drivers and Stalin, the patriarch of all socialist female tractor drivers (fig. 10). Fascinated with tractors, Stalin rode on the first tractor made in the Soviet Union and spearheaded the surge of female tractor drivers (Shujun 1949). He played an important role in constructing Pasha, who was said to be his mistress, into the first Soviet female tractor driver.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have approached socialist modernity in Mao’s China as an alternative modernity that departs from the capitalist mode of modernization. Specifically, it addresses one aspect of socialist modernity, namely the modernization of rural women, by focusing on the female tractor driver during the agricultural collectivization campaign in the 1950s and early 1960s. In accordance with the socialist discourse, rural women worked alongside men in the public sphere and were thus theoretically equal to their male counterparts. To reinforce the notion of gender equality, working women were usually represented with masculine qualities.



Figure 9. Liu Haiying’s double role as socialist singsong girl and female tractor driver.



Figure 10. Liang Jun in front of the portrait of Stalin.

The conventional scholarly representation has it that in Mao's China issues of gender and sexuality were subsumed under the category of class and that Mao-era women were characterized by gender effacement and desexualization. This scholarly discourse usually treats the Mao era as an undifferentiated whole. In the case of the female tractor driver, however, we find different representations in different periods: although representations in the early 1950s upheld gender erasure/equality and desexualization, those of the late 1950s and early 1960s often constructed the female tractor drivers as mothers or maternal figures in relation to the domestic sphere. In longer narrative representations, in particular novels and films, female tractor drivers are always situated in a hierarchical gender relation to new socialist patriarchs in both the domestic and the public spheres: male tractor drivers cum husbands, state and party officials, and the Soviet Union. The presence of these new patriarchs and their power of surveillance diminished the inspiring image of the female tractor driver and circumscribed the power she had derived from modern technology and machines.

In all the cases discussed in this essay, female tractor drivers were always represented by others, in particular men and state media, not by themselves. Their own voices and thoughts were suppressed by the project of socialist modernity. The female tractor driver phenomenon was not unique in gender history of the Mao period. The history of socialist marriage, for instance, began with a strong statement of gender equality in the New Marriage Law in 1950 but then in implementation gradually gave way to entrenched traditions.¹³ The changing representations of the female tractor driver epitomized the larger fluid gender relations during the socialist decades, thus providing us with a unique perspective to understand the aspirations and struggles of (rural) women in socialist China. The transformation of the image of the female tractor driver, as well as other gender changes, embodies the contestation and reformulation of socialist modernity, wherein the promises and limitations of the socialist

¹³ The discourse and practice of gender equality in the Soviet Union had the same contradictory trajectory. Despite the ideal of "gender equality," Soviet male and female aviators and Arctic explorers were represented differently: whereas male aviators and explorers were represented as heroic and in direct relation to Stalin and the state, their female counterparts were not represented as heroic daredevils, but rather as women, wives, and mothers doing womanly work such as sewing. In real life, female aviators and explorers underwent more hardships than their male counterparts because of traditional sexist values both within and outside the Party, which created barriers for women's participation in public work. See Petrone 2000.

project (in modernizing rural women) dynamically unfolded during the 1950s and early 1960s, at a time when China underwent drastic yet uncertain transformations at the threshold between the traditional and the radical modern.

Glossary

Beidacang	北大倉
Beidahuang	北大荒
Danzengcuomao	丹增錯毛
Dingzhenzhuoma	丁珍卓瑪
Dongfanghong	東方紅
Dongge	冬哥
Honghe	紅河
huzhu zu	互助組
Julong	巨龍
KangMei yuan Chao hao	抗美援朝號
Kumeizi	苦妹子
<i>Kumu fengchun</i>	枯木逢春
Liang Jun	梁軍
Liu Haiying	劉海英
Liu Shaoqi	劉少奇
<i>Malan huakai</i>	馬蘭花開
<i>Meng Xiangying fanshen</i>	孟祥英翻身
nü tuolajishou	女拖拉機手
nüjie diyi	女界第一
qipao	旗袍
<i>Renmin huabao</i>	人民畫報
Saren	薩仁
<i>Shengming de huohua</i>	生命的火花
Suoyaoerma	索耀爾瑪
tieniu	鐵牛
Wang Mengyun	王孟筠
Wang Zhen	王震
<i>Wuduo jinhua</i>	五朵金花
Xiao Tanke	小坦克
Xiaola	小臘
<i>Xiaye</i>	夏夜
<i>Xin Zhongguo funü</i>	新中國婦女
Zheng Junli	鄭君裡

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