

RESEARCH ARTICLE

From *The Good Earth* to *Mother India*: esthetic circulations of peasant womanhood between India and China

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Abstract

The mid-1920s to the 1950s witnessed the uneasy imbrication of the rural, the peasantry, and women as symbols and subjects of the nation in the era of anti colonial and socialist movements in both India and China. This essay examines this rural/peasant/woman nexus within conflicting representations of the peasant woman as embodiment of the nation's past, present and future, to map a range of connected global political-aesthetic imaginations of Indian and Chinese nationhood. A close analysis of the convergence of three texts – Pearl Buck's novel, *The Good Earth* (1931), Katherine Mayo's polemic, *Mother India* (1927), and Indian director Mehboob Khan's re-staging and transformation of both in his 1957 film, *Mother India* – opens up to a wider set of entangled Indian and Chinese co-texts within an expanded space of global aesthetic circulation. Together, these texts reveal a contested history of representations of the rural, the peasantry, and women in projections of Indian and Chinese national becoming that, in the end, cannot be easily recuperated or consolidated within singular nation-state narratives.

Key words: Film; India–China; literature; nation; peasant; rural; woman

In 1937, American MGM Studios released director Sydney Franklin's film, *The Good Earth*, which would become one of the period's biggest box-office and critically acclaimed successes. The film, which tells an epic tale of the Chinese peasantry's enduring connection to the soil, was based on the immensely popular 1931 novel of the same title, authored by American Nobel Laureate and long-time resident of China, Pearl Buck.¹ *The Good Earth* sees its protagonist, Wang Lung the poor farmer, transforming in a self-made-man-fashion into a rich landowner, while struggling to maintain an essential connection to the land. Wang Lung's story deeply resonated with a turn in 1930s American culture toward narratives of the rural as the soul of the nation, and led to a popular sense of solidarity between America and China during a period when the rise of anti-colonial and socialist nationalisms across Asia reconfigured the political relations between the two countries (Leong 2005, p. 29; Lye 2005, pp. 204–205, 208–09; So 2016, pp. 43, 55). At the same time, in late-Republican China, where the novel's first of many translations (as 大地 *Dadi*, in Chinese) appeared in serialized form in *Dongfang zazhi*/*Eastern Miscellany* (东方杂志) in 1932 – Pearl Buck

¹ Pearl Buck won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1938, with the Nobel committee especially praising her “rich and truly epic descriptions of peasant life in China.” See *The Nobel Prize in Literature 1938*. NobelPrize.org. Nobel Media AB 2021. Wed. 20 Jan 2021. <<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1938/summary/>>

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became a profoundly controversial literary voice depicting the peasantry as essential repository of the Chinese nation (see e.g., Liu 1992; Lovell 2006, pp. 89–93; So 2016, pp. 42–43, 71–72).²

A story of “transpacific circulations” connecting conflicting Chinese and American imaginaries of the rural as core of the nation, via *The Good Earth*’s Wang Lung, has been well documented (see e.g., Leong 2005; Lye 2005; So 2016). In this essay, I seek to tell another story of global circulation and connected political-esthetic histories that extends out of this contested imaginary – this time via Wang Lung’s wife, O-Lan, and the figure of the peasant woman as embodiment of the nation. Rather than a transpacific lens, this story is situated within the shared “temporality” of anti-colonial and socialist nationalisms that emerged in the mid-1920s to the 1950s, and in which the cultural and political movements gathering force and establishing states in India and China were central (Duara and Perry 2018, pp. 5–7, 15). This shared temporality is informed by a set of globally circulating discourses and debates around what I call the rural/peasant/woman nexus, where each of these become interlinked yet contending sites representing the nation’s state of oppression, its constant core amid necessary historical change, and its potential to shape a new “liberated” political community (Duara 1998; Duara and Perry 2018, p. 8; Han 2005, pp. 19–69; Jodhka 2002; Merkel-Hess 2016, pp. 4, 14; Ramaswamy 2010). I trace this shared temporality in the overlapping encounters with *The Good Earth*, novel and film, and the figure of O-Lan in Indian and Chinese literature and cinema – encounters which are themselves further informed by a set of what I term resonant and mutually framing “co-texts.” From Pearl Buck’s own second novel, *The Mother* (1934) to Katherine Mayo’s polemic against Indian Independence, *Mother India* (1927) to Indian director Mehboob Khan’s two films, *Aurat* (1940) and *Mother India* (1957), to the peasant women-centred stories of Chinese writers Lu Xun and Xiao Hong, to K.A. Abbas’s Bengal Famine film, *Dharti Ke Lal* (1946), we see how the circulations of *The Good Earth* participate in a moment of connected India–China histories in which ideas of the rural, the peasantry, and women were not only key to imaginations of the nation in political and cultural movements in both places, but also presented the stakes of the past, present, and future of Chinese and Indian nations in a larger, global, imaginary.

Thus, a connected China–India history emerges here less through a comparative model of two separate nationalist movements and emerging nation-states sharing a similar set of concerns, or through a model of reading India through China and vice versa, as it does by bringing to light an expanded space of esthetic circulation where a shared temporality manifests itself and is generated (see e.g., Chen 2010; Duara and Perry 2018; Ghosh 2017, pp. 700, 720–21). The space of esthetic circulation is one in which Chinese and Indian authors, artists, and filmmakers produced their own works, as well as encountered, consumed, and actively assimilated or transformed an array of texts, genres, and modes of representation from disparate locations and media to formulate what Sanjukta Sunderason has so aptly described as the terrain of a “partisan aesthetics” (2020). Although Sunderason defines this terrain in the “ambiguous vocabularies” of radical, popular, and nationalist art from late-colonial to post-colonial India, I borrow her generative concept to suggest a shared leftist political-esthetic terrain shaped by anti-colonial and socialist nationalisms in both India and China from the mid-1920s to the 1950s (2020, p. 38).

Partisan esthetics is a particularly apt term to define this terrain as it captures what Sunderason has termed its “conjunctural” mode (2020, pp. 23–24, 39), or what Priyamvada Gopal has posited as a moment of leftist cultural radicalisms in which the “precise modalities of the partnership between aesthetics and politics” were both unstable and generative of multiple imaginations of “the people” and “the nation,” including in terms of the esthetic forms through which such representations would emerge (2005, p. 5). Following Sunderason, we can particularly locate what she identifies as the “vacillating” or “unresolved” ways in which “the political enters the artistic field through aesthetic forms,” specifically in the shifts and exchanges between contending genres of socialist realism that connect

²The filming and eventual release of Franklin’s *The Good Earth* film in China were subject to their own set of controversies in taking Buck’s depiction of the Chinese peasantry to the silver screen – especially by the Nationalist (*Guomindang*) government cultural bureaucracy (Hunt 1977, p. 49; Leong 2005, p. 28).

Indian and Chinese leftist literary and cinematic texts from the 1920s to the 1950s to a larger transnational circulation of such genres and their representational politics across the revolutionary, interwar, and popular front eras in the Soviet Union, Europe, and North America (Sunderason 2020, pp. 38–39, 41, 47).

A shared space of “partisan esthetics” materializes and is produced through common questions of representational politics, form, and technique, but also in the realm of practices, institutions, and relationships that enable and mediate the circulation of texts. The esthetic terrain of circulation proposed here is shaped as much by power binaries and competing political imperatives, as it is by other modes of encounter, dialog, allegiance, and transculturation. Here, another sense of a “shared temporality” emerges to produce both possibilities and failures of solidarity, and forms of agency in redefining worlds across powerful material and discursive divides (Gandhi 2005; Pratt 2008, p. 8; So 2016, pp. xxv–xxvi, 63; Thornber 2009, p. 752; Volland 2017). Thus, if my analysis of representations of the rural/peasant/woman nexus in imaginations of Indian and Chinese nations is built around resonances and affinities of genres, themes, and leftist literary and cinematic esthetic models, it is also informed by this expanded space of esthetic circulation in which the “partisan esthetics” of leftist literature and film in India and China are co-produced. The mapping of “co-texts” animates the dynamic between textual resonances and the space of entangled encounters, translations, forms of assimilation, transformation, criticism, and rejection between and through texts (Pratt 2008; Thornber 2009, p. 750).

The ultimate goal of foregrounding this dynamic is to understand how representations of the peasant woman as embodiment of Indian and Chinese nations reveal a fraught space of esthetic and political imaginaries of the nation as a politically, culturally, and economically sovereign territory defined by a set of “liberated” social relations. The suturing of the rural, the peasant, and women into the space of the national narrative is incomplete, even as different authoring discourses and imperatives attempt their smooth consolidation. This fraught space is further situated within an equally contested space in which the meanings of the political in leftist esthetic forms – i.e., how the esthetic is a political space, or what political attachments mean in terms of esthetic representation – remain unsettled. Through a dialog between the co-texts I bring to light in this essay, then, I argue that the political-esthetic imagination of the rural/peasant/woman nexus in Indian and Chinese nationalisms presents as much the consolidation and recuperation of these interlinked sites into singular narratives of national becoming, as it reveals a trail of more contested interventions and trajectories that may enliven a set of more radical possibilities existing within this moment of shared anti colonial and socialist temporality.

From O-Lan to Radha

Our story begins in 1938, when Indian director, Mehboob Khan (1907–1964),³ viewed Sydney Franklin’s film version of *The Good Earth* in Delhi, and was inspired to make his own film depicting the rural-as-nation, this time centered on the figure of the peasant woman as its quintessential embodiment (Chatterjee 2002, p. 12). The result would be his 1940 film *Aurat/Woman*, which then became the blue print for his iconic 1957 global super-hit, *Mother India*, still seen as the most successful film in Indian cinematic history and its transnational projection (Chatterjee 2002, p. 9).⁴ Indeed, although Pearl Buck’s *The Good Earth* pivots around the struggles and conflicts of Wang

³Mehboob Khan (born Ramjan Khan) is more widely known as “Mehboob.” For the purposes of consistency, however, I will use either Mehboob Khan, or Khan.

⁴From its release in Bombay in 1957, *Mother India* had continuous play across India and globally, at least until the 1990s. Apart from several domestic film awards, it was also nominated for the Best Foreign Feature film award at the Academy Awards (Oscars) in 1958, and reportedly only lost by one vote to the winner, Federico Fellini’s *Nights of Cabiria*. Nargis also won the Best Actress award at the Karlovy Vary International Film festival in 1958. See Chatterjee 2002, p. 9; Sinha 2006, pp. 248–49; Karlovy Vary International Film Festival History, 11th Festival, July 12–27, 1958 (<https://www.kviff.com/en/history/1958>).

Lung, in Sydney Franklin's film, O-Lan shares the narrative and symbolic center (see, e.g., Conn 2010, 192; Hoban 1992, pp. 131–33). O-Lan's death comes closer to the end than it does in the novel, her husband suddenly remembering his love for her at the same time as he rediscovers his love and attachment to the land. The film's final scene has Wang Lung picking up the earth around the peach tree that O-Lan had planted near the start of the film to symbolize their shared effort to make the land fruitful, and declares, "O-Lan, you are the earth!" (Franklin, 1937).

In a twist, however, although O-Lan's cinematically rendered mythic connection to the land was the key inspiration for Mehboob Khan's films, in the end, he followed his friend and scriptwriter Babubhai Mehta's suggestion to base a film script on another of Pearl Buck's novels, *The Mother* (1934) (Chatterjee 2002, p. 12). *The Mother* is a feminized *Good Earth*, or, rather, an alternative story of the symbolic connection between O-Lan, the land, and the eternal values of a cyclical rural moral universe, chronicled through the life of a nameless Chinese peasant woman who deeply embodies a fertile mother-earth subjectivity. Both of Mehboob Khan's films follow the basic story of *The Mother*, although now the struggling peasant woman at the heart of the narrative is powerfully named as Radha (Sardar Akhtar in *Aurat*, Nargis in *Mother India*).⁵ Along with this name change, Khan's films radically transform the narrative and visual esthetics of both *The Mother* and *The Good Earth* (novel and film). Radha becomes an embodiment of the rural-as-nation, both as its essence and through linking a rural struggle against forces of nature, class, and gendered oppression to a national struggle for political, economic, and cultural sovereignty. These themes come to a dramatic contest in two key moments of both films. The first is in their climactic scenes of a natural disaster that bring out both the possibility of peasant revolt and reveal the economic and sexual vulnerability of the peasant woman. The second is in their shared penultimate scene of Radha shooting dead her own rebellious son, who is about to kidnap one of the village's "daughters" after killing the symbol of rural social oppression in the film – the rich and exploitative landlord/moneylender, Sukhi-Lala.

Yet, *Aurat* is not *Mother India*. Again, both narratively and esthetically, there are significant differences between the two films, differences that bespeak the shifting "modalities" of the relationship between the esthetic and the political, the debates between critical, social, and socialist realist politics of form and representation, and contending ideas of the rural/peasant/woman as emblematic condition of the nation that demarcate the period in which both films were produced as well as the one between them (Gopal 2005, p. 5; Sunderason 2020, pp. 38–39). The transformations of the 1940 *Aurat* into the 1957 *Mother India* will be elaborated below, but they may be momentarily posited by their different endings: *Aurat* has Radha remembering her life through an assemblage of past scenes that she melancholically observes like a film; *Mother India* ends, as it began, with a new sense of historical time and change, as Radha is celebrated as a mother whose sacrifices may be honored and authored by the "liberated" space of the new post-colonial nation. Thus, in the encounter and transformation of Pearl Buck's texts into Mehboob Khan's films, we can ask what makes possible O-Lan becoming Radha, first in *Aurat*, and then in her spectacularly re-envisioned form in *Mother India*? What do the transformations of this figure of peasant womanhood as a symbol of the nation within these texts and their related co-texts tell us about global political-esthetic imaginaries of the rural/peasant/woman nexus in which these subjects both define and contend with imaginations of the coming-into-being of Indian and Chinese nationhood in the era of the anticolonial and socialist nationalisms?

An expanded space of esthetic circulations

Mehboob Khan's inspiration from Sydney Franklin's film and Pearl Buck's novels is often mentioned in histories of the making of the 1957 *Mother India*, but usually only as an ironic fact for such an emphatic representation of Indian womanhood (see, e.g., Chatterjee 2002, p. 12; Creekmur 2007,

⁵Radha is a Hindu goddess of love, tenderness and devotion, as well as consort of Krishna. See Pauwels (2010) and Mishra (1989) for discussions of the mythological dimensions of the characters in Mehboob Khan's films.

p. 178; Sinha 2006, p. 248). Equally, the 1940 *Aurat* is often noted as a blueprint for *Mother India* but there has been little consideration of the relationship and changes between the two films within the shifting terrain of the political-esthetic questions around representing the rural/peasant/woman-as-nation nexus that animates their interlinked production.⁶

Most often, the 1957 *Mother India* has been placed within a history of Indian nationalist responses to another text, American polemicist Katherine Mayo's 1927 tract, *Mother India*. Mayo infamously argued against Indian independence from British rule due largely to the treatment of women at the heart of what she termed Indian, read as essentially Hindu, culture – thus solidifying an imperialist imagination of India as “backward” and in need of saving by western civilization. Mayo's title and text also evoked and argued through the terms of a powerful Indian nationalist imagery of *Bharat Mata* (Mother India) – an essentialized “woman-as-nation” concept encapsulated by the map of the Indian nation overlaid with the image of a goddess-like Indian woman (Chatterjee 2002, p. 49; Ramaswamy 2010, p. 5; Sinha 1998, p. 34). Since the late nineteenth century, this representation of the “cartographed” Indian woman was used both to depict the captivity of the nation/woman under colonial rule and to represent the spiritual plenitude and endurance of a timeless nation-as-civilization that would emerge once more out of its state of oppression (Ramaswamy 2010, p. 5; Sinha 1998, p. 32, 2006, p. 48). As Mrinalini Sinha has elaborated, Mayo's argument opened the space for a nationalist revalorization of this imagery in which the liberation of the Indian nation is the liberation of the Indian woman – leaving in the historical dustbin more radical formulations of gender, class, and caste liberation that challenged this essentialist discourse (Sinha 1998, pp. 56–57, 2006, p. 55). Mehboob Khan's 1957 film, *Mother India*, thus, becomes as a definitive post-colonial cinematic “nationalist rebuttal” to Mayo's imperialist text, affirming its essentialized, civilizational figuration (Sinha 2006, p. 25; see also Roy 1998; Schulze 2002; Thomas 1989).⁷

Without fully refuting a reading of Mehboob Khan's *Mother India* as a finale to the history of Indian nationalist responses to Katherine Mayo's imperialist text, I re-position this relationship, via Pearl Buck, into a more expanded space of political-esthetic circulatory histories embedded within the film. Buck's novels and Mayo's *Mother India* participate as co-texts within this expanded space. The American scene of the late 1920s to the 1940s, where *The Good Earth* and Mayo's *Mother India* co-circulated as the two most popular “non-Atlantic” texts, inspiring a host of commentaries and cross-media adaptations, and where Buck and Mayo themselves contended on questions of Indian and Chinese national futures through various public forums, brings to light their hitherto unstudied entangled history (Nadkarni 2008, p. 805; Conn 2010, pp. 199, 268; Lye 2005, pp. 241–42; Sinha 1998, pp. 2–3, 5; So 2016, p. 65). Both texts and their authors shaped global imaginaries of India and China, via their representations of the rural, the peasantry, and women as symbols and symptoms of nationhood, during a historical moment that witnessed a restructuring of imperial relations through the rise of anti-colonial and socialist nationalisms (Sinha 2006, pp. 24–28). Brought together, they further make visible the contours of connected India–China political-esthetic vocabularies and modes of encounter in this moment.

Mehboob Khan's evocation of nationalist responses to Mayo's polemic in his 1957 film, and Pearl Buck's contentious dialog with Chinese leftist writers and critics over representing the rural as national space, both expose the power hierarchies and instances of failed solidarities engendered by imperialist binaries. The connection between Pearl Buck's novels, Sydney Franklin's film, and Mehboob Khan's *Aurat* and *Mother India*, however, suggests forms of encounter in which power hierarchies are more attenuated, or that generate instances of political-esthetic affiliation, and modes of transculturation that crisscross and

⁶Chatterjee (2002) has a brief discussion of the interaction between the two films, but not in terms of mapping out the significant shifts in political-esthetic vocabulary between them (pp. 12, 31).

⁷Mehboob Khan himself proposed the linkage between his film and Mayo's *Mother India* in a letter responding to the Indian Ministry of Foreign Affairs concern over a film to be titled “Mother India,” but it seems to have been more of an afterthought, rather than a clear connection from the start (Chatterjee 2002, p. 20; Sinha 2006, p. 248).

sometimes go beyond such binaries. Political-esthetic encounters here participate in the making of a “coeval” transnational cultural space of debate, contention, and possible solidarities (So 2016, pp. xxv–xxvi).

The leftist anti-colonial and socialist esthetics of “the people” in both India and China – including their active engagement with a resonant and shared transnational body of leftist esthetic movements, theories, and texts from the mid-1920s to the 1950s – also emerges within this expanded space of political-esthetic circulation, its structures and temporalities (see e.g., Bohnenkamp 2021; Chakrabarti 2019; Gopal 2005; Grewal 2013; Pang 2002; Sunderason 2020; Volland 2017). Although a more specific elaboration of the institutions, practices, and networks of leftist esthetic circulations across India and China is not possible here, I suggest their contours and dynamics through my readings below. I first read Pearl Buck’s literary interventions in China within the sphere of leftist cultural debates and through key co-texts that grappled with the representation of the rural as national space via the peasant woman as its embodiment. These texts and interpretations of them resonate deeply with the contexts of Mehboob Khan’s *Aurat* and *Mother India*. I then turn to a close reading of Khan’s transformations of Pearl Buck’s works that embeds his films within a connected body of Indian and transnational leftist co-texts. In the end, I suggest how bringing these Indian and Chinese co-texts, encounters, and modes of transculturation together within an expanded space of political-esthetic circulation, brings to light a contested terrain of meanings to the rural/peasant/woman nexus as interlinked sites representing Indian and Chinese nations – a complex terrain that takes us beyond the frame of predetermined nationalist recuperations of imperialist texts.

From O-Lan to Golden Bough

The critical reception of Pearl Buck’s novels within the Chinese leftist cultural sphere of the 1930s distills the tenor of the intense globally resonant political and cultural debates over the question of the rural and the peasantry as nation in this period, and connects them to a range of Chinese co-texts writing the rural and peasantry as symbols and subjects of the Chinese nation.⁸ Buck’s novels and their Chinese co-texts further bring to the fore the gendered politics of writing the rural and peasantry into the center of the national imaginary, through representations of the peasant woman as embodiment of the national past, present, and future. Leftist literary depictions of peasant women oscillate between their symbolization as downtrodden figures of an ossified traditional patriarchal order, or conversely as symbols of an endangered cultural purity located in the rural, to representations of women as superbly exploited victims of feudal and imperialist-capitalist classed oppression, to narratives of their emerging revolutionary peasant consciousness, or as laboring “heroines” of a new liberated socialist nation (see e.g., Chen 2003; Du 2017; Grewal 2012, pp. 228–34; Han 2005, p. 39; Spakowski 2020). This literary imagination of peasant women meets a larger discourse around “the woman question,” in which gendered forms of oppression are acknowledged but often sutured into questions of national oppression and liberation (see e.g., Evans 2003; Judge 2002; Merkel Hess 2016, p. 50). Pearl Buck’s novels and their Chinese co-texts illuminate this suturing while also exposing the tensions within this discourse through the writing of the peasant woman as emblematic of the rural and the peasantry-as-nation.

Two key co-texts connected to Pearl Buck’s imagination of the rural/peasant/woman as essence of the nation and its reception within the Chinese leftist literary sphere are Lu Xun’s *Zhufu/New Year’s Sacrifice* (祝福, 1924), and Xiao Hong’s *Shengsi chang/The Field of Life and Death* (生死场, 1935). Lu Xun’s works have a uniquely tangled history with those of Pearl Buck. Not only did they comment on each other’s literary creations, but their works were simultaneously subject to critical attention and debate within the changing field of ideas of realism and depictions of the rural and peasantry that gripped the leftist literary sphere in the late 1920s and 1930s, and reverberated into the 1950s (see e.g., Conn 2010, p. 199; Liu 1992, p. 64). The differences in the critical commentary on Lu Xun’s

⁸For more detailed descriptions of these debates around the rural and the peasantry in both India and China, see e.g., Han 2006, pp. 19–69; Jodhka 2002; Mangalagiri 2017, p. 13; Merkel-Hess 2016.

and Pearl Buck's works highlight the conflicted contours of this shifting vocabulary. Xiao Hong, who was a refugee from Japanese-occupied Manchuria, was supported by Lu Xun, and her *The Field of Life and Death* was published the same year that Pearl Buck's *The Mother* first appeared in Chinese translation.⁹ The two novels come together in their shared depiction of peasant women's experience of the rural space and in their questioning of the modern nation as liberated space. Yet, their vast divergence, also on these terms, and the radically different critical appraisal of the two authors in the Chinese leftist sphere further illuminates the fraught imbrication of "the woman question" in the imagination of the rural and the peasantry as symbol of the nation.

Lu Xun's *New Year's Sacrifice* presents a disturbing encounter between the narrator – a modern, educated, and reformist young man returning to his village for the New Year – and his former maid-servant, Xianglin Sao, or Xianglin's wife. With all his modern knowledge and reformist ideas, the narrator fumbles in the face of this destitute figure and he has no answer to her desperate questions about salvation in the afterlife. When she dies the next day, the narrator retells her tale of tragedies and cruel rejection by the village community, but with little explanatory or redemptive power. Unlike in *The Good Earth*, where O-Lan herself has redemptive power through maintaining her connection to *The Good Earth*, or in *The Mother*, where the Mother's sense of her position in the rural order is recovered by the birth of a grandson, for Xianglin wife, there is no redemption, either through the ethos of the village community or through the 'liberated' male national agent's knowledge.

Lu Xun's experimental critical social realism and representation of hopeless, hapless, or tragically innocent poor peasant characters who fail to understand the conditions of their existence, made him a foundational figure of the iconoclastic May Fourth cultural movement of the nineteen teens and early 1920s, in which an ossified traditional order appeared as the source of China's cultural, economic, and political decline (Anderson 1990, pp. 76–118; Denton 2016). By the late 1920s, however, as ideas around both the rural and peasantry as symbols of the nation and the debate on the literary forms for representing these subjects changed, Lu Xun's May Fourth works came under criticism for their pessimism. The 1930s emerged as a new era of "revolutionary literature" (Cheng 1928). The oppressions of the rural space were more clearly the oppressions of a classed order created by the intertwined structures of feudalism and imperialist-capitalism, while poor peasants, suffering under this order, were also heroic and the subjects of revolutionary consciousness. At the same time, debates over literary forms turned toward the incorporation of traditional popular forms as key ways to represent the lived experience of peasants and proletarians and to develop "national forms" of revolutionary literature and arts (see e.g., Hung 1994; Van Fleit Hang 2013). The difficult status of Lu Xun's 1920s' works in this sphere – even as he himself remained a dominant figure in developing, promoting, and debating these new leftist esthetics (Davies 2013) – distills both the contours of this shifting space, and illuminates the terms of Pearl Buck's entry and controversial status within it.

Pearl Buck herself disparaged what she saw as the culturally disconnected realism of May Fourth literary depictions of the peasantry as a downtrodden "backward" mass (So 2016, p. 51, Spurling 2010, p. 185). Her criticism and own turn to rural culture and the classical vernacular tradition put her squarely within the emerging discourse of developing literary forms connected to "the people" that dominated Chinese leftist literary debates in the 1930s (So 2016, p. 51). Yet, Pearl Buck's answer, to posit an authentic Chinese culture rooted in the "vast folk mind" of an eternal, organic rural society (see Buck, 1938), diverged from the themes and formal interventions of this leftist political-esthetic project. For her critics, Buck's *The Good Earth* presented a fantasy of an unassailable and essentially "just" rural order in which poor peasants may struggle but in which they essentially see themselves as participants. As one of Lu Xun's most prominent protégés, the writer and critic Hu Feng, argued, *The Good Earth* elides the structures of landlordism, imperialism, capitalism, and economic crises that actually inform the events in the lives of Wang Lung and his family (1935).¹⁰

⁹*Muqin* (母亲), translated by Shao Zong 邵宗, Shanghai Four Press Publishing House, 1935.

¹⁰See also Writer Mao Dun's 1936 short story, "A Ballad of Algae" (水藻行), written to counter the representation of the Chinese peasant in *The Good Earth*. See Wang (2007, p. 68).

Curiously, Hu Feng notes that *The Good Earth's* representation of the downtrodden rural woman is one of its strong points, even as Buck fails to represent the structures engendering her oppression (1935). Yet, in both *The Good Earth* and *The Mother*, although O-Lan and the Mother are subjects of tragedy, they are not represented by Buck as downtrodden. Rather, they both represent more firmly than their male counterparts the noble connection of the peasantry to the “good earth” and the timeless endurance of a Chinese rural moral universe. Thus, although in Pearl Buck’s novels, peasant women represent the resilient, if buffeted, authenticity of the nation, Hu Feng, like Lu Xun’s narrator (though he fails), assumes the peasant woman’s condition can be represented through liberating forms of consciousness or knowledge that will bring forth a new political community of the nation. Although Lu Xun’s story questions this assumption, Xiao Hong’s *The Field of Life and Death* not only challenges Pearl Buck’s representation, but also fractures the smooth consolidation of peasant women’s experience into the territorial nation’s liberation.

Lu Xun wrote a preface and Hu Feng an afterword to *The Field of Life and Death*, framing it as a firm representation of the oppressed yet resilient and resistance-capable beating heart of the real “people” of China – which was very unlike, at least for them, Pearl Buck’s representation (see Liu 1994, p. 38). But, their framing elides *The Field of Life and Death's* ambivalent presentation of the peasantry’s idea of the nation, and its questioning of what the collectivity of the nation promises to women – despite their willingness to put their bodies on the line to fight for it. The young woman Golden Bough’s words are striking here. After going into the city in an attempt to find work, she is raped, not by a Japanese soldier but by a Chinese soldier. Golden Bough states, “I used to hate men, and now I hate those [Japanese].... If I hate the Chinese as well, then there is nothing else for me to hate” (Xiao Hong 2002, p. 84).

Golden Bough, thus, not only upends a dominant nationalist linkage of the rape of woman as rape of the nation, but also questions if a national community that treats her as a woman equally is possible. This questioning takes on a visual form in Xiao Hong’s own cover design for *The Field of Life and Death*. The image has elicited many interpretations linking the struggle of China’s peasantry to the fate of the nation as a whole. One interpretation is that it depicts the uplifted face of a peasant woman figured onto a map of Manchuria, or the divided territory of the China (Liu 1994, p. 48). Although such a reading suggests the peasant woman body seamlessly symbolizes the linked struggles of women and the nation, we might also posit, how, in both its harsh visuality and in its ambiguity, the image questions this seamless connection, and actually presents a more fractured relationship between the rural space, the national space, and women.

Lu Xun’s *New Year’s Sacrifice* and Xiao Hong’s *The Field of Life and Death* become key co-texts of Pearl Buck’s novels imagining the Chinese nation through the rural/peasant/woman nexus. The co-circulation and critical appraisal of these texts within the expanded space of the rural turn in China from mid-1920s to the 1950s, not only reveals the shifting vocabularies of this turn in both political and esthetic imaginaries, but also the tensions and ambiguities existing within the imbrication of the rural and peasantry as symbol and subject of the nation, and women as symbols and subjects of the nation. Similar tensions, via Pearl Buck’s novels, come together in Mehboob Khan’s transformations of O-Lan into Radha in both the 1940 *Aurat* and the 1957 *Mother India*. I return to Lu Xun and Xiao Hong’s texts in the conclusion to re-stage their ambivalent depictions within the socialist and post-colonial space that connects the new Indian and Chinese nation-states in the 1950s. Through these co-texts, I ask if we can complicate *Mother India's* trajectory as a film seamlessly suturing the peasant woman into a singular narrative of post-colonial national liberation. What politics of the rural and peasantry-as-nation contend with the politics of woman-as-nation in Khan’s films and their Indian co-texts?

The texts of *Mother India*

Although *Aurat* and *Mother India* after it, follow much of the plot and characters of Pearl Buck’s *The Mother*, there are key aspects of their stories that link back to *The Good Earth* novel and film,

transforming both, not solely as instances of cultural localization but rather through modes of transculturation within the expanded space of shifting leftist political-esthetic vocabularies, in India and China that this essay has sought to map out. Khan's films particularly illustrate the shifting vocabularies around the rural that marked the late colonial and early post-colonial periods in Indian literature, visual art, theatre, and cinema – from a nationalist pastoral romanticism, to the rural as a site of struggle on the land and deep social hierarchies, to the rural as potentially revolutionary subaltern space (Sunderason 2020, pp. 37–38, 47). These representations appear in the divergent critical, social, and socialist realisms animating the movements of progressive arts in the 1930s and the communist cultural front of the Bengal Famine era of the 1940s, the legacies of which reverberated through the 1950s (*ibid.*, 41).

Khan and his production team's varied interactions with the politics, esthetics, and texts of the Progressive Writers Association and the Indian People's Theatre Association, and his own avid incorporation of a set of transnational socialist and leftist avant-garde film techniques distill the locational and experimental terms in which "partisan aesthetics" emerges in late colonial and post-colonial India (Chatterjee 2002, p. 32; Sunderason 2020, p. 42). This engagement is an important aspect of the social and socialist realist esthetics of both *Aurat* and *Mother India*, and also speaks to the differences between them. That Pearl Buck's novels and Franklin's film become part of this space of transnational leftist esthetics in Khan's films, suggest the ambiguous status of Buck's representations across this terrain, as well as the multiple forms of interaction between the political and the esthetic, and modes of affiliation, affinity, and solidarity within "the partisan esthetics" of this period.¹¹

Finally, *Aurat* and *Mother India* both redirect Pearl Buck's O-Lan and the Mother into the conflicted space of the representation of woman-as-nation that we see in Katherine Mayo's polemic and the imagery of the Mother India figure – or the "cartographed body" of the Indian woman as a symbol of the nation (Ramaswamy 2010, p. 5). *Aurat*'s imagination of the peasant mother presages what in the 1940s would become a more explicit re-articulation of the imagistic "mother-map" symbiosis within cultural representations of the Bengal Famine (1943–1944). The peasant woman and her linkage to the space of the Indian nation emerged in dramatic and traumatic forms in this period, and that interval is an important aspect of how we may discuss the re-writing of Radha between *Aurat* and *Mother India*.

Transformations of *The Good Earth* and *The Mother in Aurat*

Like both the novel and film versions of *The Good Earth*, *Aurat* begins with the marriage day of the protagonist. The meaning of this day between these texts, however, takes on a different valence, in terms of setting up the trajectory of the narrative, its symbolic structure, and the staging of central conflicts. When Wang Lung arrives at the rich House of Hwang to collect his new bride, O-Lan, a lowly kitchen servant there, he is met with cold, opulent indifference that gives him a sense of inferiority. This sense opens up a desire to have what the Hwang's have, and, upon learning of the family's financial decline, he hatches a plot to buy the land they are so eager to sell off (*The Good Earth*, pp. 18–20, 52).¹² Thus, in *The Good Earth*, the rich family is not written as having taken anything away from the poor peasants, but is superior because of what they own, especially their vast tracts of land. The Hwang family suffers decline because they have lost their connection to the land through an over-consumption of goods not produced on the land (GE 52). Wang Lung's acquisition of this land leads him to a struggle to accumulate more land and become rich, but to not, like the Hwang family, lose the connection to and the understanding of the land as the essential resource for life.

¹¹Peter Conn (2010, pp. 174–75) notes how in both American leftist and Soviet literary spheres of the late 1930s, Buck's novels had a positive, if at times ambiguous, reception. In America, Buck was sometimes seen as a writer of proletarian fiction.

¹²The page numbers for *The Good Earth* are from the 1935 edition (See Buck, Pearl S. 1935). All subsequent in-text citations from this work will appear as GE.

The novel's central struggle between land and wealth also defines the symbolic role of O-Lan. O-Lan does not struggle with the effects of accumulation like Wang Lung, but continues to symbolize the land as life-giving resource, and the natural "goodness" of a land-connected rural moral universe, which has its own rhythms of fortune, adversity, justice, and injustice. After surviving a famine and returning from the city with stolen riches, with which he buys more land – and laborers to cultivate it – Wang Lung begins to devalue both the land and O-Lan's earthy, laboring body (GE 162). In Franklin's film, as already noted, Wang Lung's re-discovery of his connection to the land and his re-discovery of his love for O-Lan are fully merged in the final scene and lines, "O-Lan, you are the earth!"

A similar conflict and rooting of the enduring authenticity of the rural moral universe onto the figure, and essentially the body, of the peasant woman occurs in Pearl Buck's *The Mother*. The Mother's family, unlike Wang Lung's, is tenant farmers, and there is a felt sense of an exploitative relationship that is not seen in *The Good Earth*. However, although this exploitative relationship carries the plot of *The Mother*, it is de-emphasized on a moral and symbolic level. The husband's anger and abandonment of his family is a moral flaw, aimed not at the exploitative relation, but the result of a desire to emulate the citified life and delicately adorned look of the landlord agent (Buck 1934, p. 25). The Mother's youngest son's forays into the city to gamble and sit in tea houses is as flawed as his turn to communism – empty of any real sense of class solidarity or even empathy for his fellow human beings (Buck 1934, pp. 151, 158).

In contrast, for the Mother, who is the subjective and symbolic center of the novel, the landlord-tenant relation is akin to the cycle of seeding, planting, harvesting, and agricultural festivals. She understands her labor not as a struggle to free herself from exploitative social relations but because it is life-giving and affirming (*The Mother*, p. 17).

If the central conflicts and their resolutions in Pearl Buck's novels present the eternal endurance of a land-connected rural moral universe via the peasant mother as its quintessential embodiment, *Aurat* suggests a much more conflicted narrative of rural social relations and establishes a different structure of meaning for the connection between the peasantry, the peasant woman, and the land. In *Aurat*, the opening scenes of a traveling wedding party and a festive marriage ceremony are quickly overshadowed when Sundar Chachi admits to herself (and the audience) that she mortgaged her land to the village's rich money lender, Sukhi-Lala, to pay for the wedding of her only son, Shyamu. This debt and Sukhi-Lala's insatiable demands as he continually adds more interest to the ledgers that Sundar Chachi and Shyamu cannot read, drives the film's narrative and visual esthetics.

The landlord/money lender is, thus, a very present and explicit exploiter of the poor in *Aurat*. There is a seething undercurrent of anger at the extractive relationship, which cuts across their individual, familial, and communal lives. This undercurrent rises to the surface when Shyamu abandons his family out of weariness over the debt-immiserated conditions under which he cannot feed his ever-growing family; it explodes further when the farmers gather to demand Sukhi-Lala release his stores of hoarded grain during the famine; and finally erupts violently in Birju's rebellion against Sukhi-Lala and the moral codes of the village. The most intense depiction of class exploitation in *Aurat*, however, happens in gendered and sexual terms, when Radha is forced to submit to Sukhi-Lala's offer of sex in exchange for food for her starving children during a devastating drought. This forced exchange is never completed, but it stands as the pinnacle of Sukhi-Lala's crass exploitation of the poor in the form of taking everything they own, including their dignity. In contrast to *The Mother's* acceptance of the landlord-tenant relation, in *Aurat*, Radha's struggle is to have her land back so she can defend both her economic and sexual integrity from the predations of the money lender – who is after both her land and her body.

Although the first half of *Aurat* weds a visuality of pastoral romanticism and the cycles of nature with that of the rural as a site of struggle against social oppression, the climactic mid-point of the film, after Shyamu's departure, significantly shifts the visual text. The forces of nature, class oppression, and sexual oppression come together during a devastating drought the grips the land and leads to famine. The drought is depicted through a series of intensifying montage sequences that drastically alter the

continuity-editing style that dominates the depictions of rural life in Sydney Franklin's *The Good Earth*. Instead, they evoke the political montage esthetics of directors such as Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin, Aleksandr Dovzhenko, and King Vidor (Chatterjee 2002, pp. 41, 42). They further embed the film within an expanded, transnational space of a new esthetics of the rural, that we also see in *Aurat*'s contemporary co-texts, such as Bengali director Nitin Bose's *Dharti Mata/Motherland* (*Deshar Mati* in Bengali, 1938) and Dovzhenko's *Zemlya/Earth* (1930) (Schulze 2002, p. 84). These films present the rural as a site of struggle against social oppression and nature, and the contest over conflicting solutions to the "agrarian question" – how to transform the immiserated rural condition – is central. In *Aurat*, however, the intensifying imagery of the devastating forces of nature and rural social oppression collude most fiercely and symbolically on the economic and sexual vulnerability of the peasant mother.

The montage presents colliding paths of action or intervention: protest and revolt that could overturn the social order (the mass of peasants gathered at Sukhi-Lala's door), divine intervention (the temple bell, Lakshmi), the cycles of nature (the drought and storm), or sexual exchange (Radha's choice). Or, one could say that the unforgiving earth and the situation of a woman about to sell her body (her honor/virtue/*laaj*) can be transformed by collectivist revolt, divine intervention, or the cycles of nature. The montage sequence presents all in dramatic and tense collision, although the film seems to choose divine intervention. The villagers back away from Sukhi-Lala without breaking down his doors (as they could easily have the power to do) and turn to praying at the temple. Radha mocks Sukhi-Lala's comparison of her to the goddess Lakshmi, but is then saved by lightning that strikes her assaulter down; she turns from sexual victim of Sukhi-Lala to his savior.

The political text of exploitation then fades with the end of the montage sequence. As the years after the drought pass, there seems to be a reconciliation in the village. Instead, the struggle turns to be against Birju's angry revenge, which would undo everything the peasant mother has struggled for to gain her economic independence and respect in the village. Indeed, at the end, *Aurat* seems to follow *The Mother* in making the peasant mother chief defender of the rural moral order, or a "village republic" (Jodhka 2002, p. 3342). Yet, the choices stand, as the villagers' treatment of Radha is cruel, while Birju's turn to robbery and his tragic end could be read as the result of the paths (the path of collective revolt) not taken. Divine intervention does not bring justice in the end.

Aurat's climatic montage and the questions it poses presage what would become a renewed focus on the social and natural forces causing devastating effects on the rural peasantry in the literature, art, and cinema of the Bengal Famine. The interval between the 1940 *Aurat* and the 1957 *Mother India* is informed by this crucial intervention and the way it both dramatized the rural condition through, and yoked the very integrity of the nation to, the economic vulnerability, and sexual honor of the famine-stricken peasant mother.

Women's honor/national honor

In 1942, as part of the communist cultural front, the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) formed, with the aim of revitalizing traditional arts as expressions of "the people" (Loomba 2019, p. 214), coinciding with the "national forms" or transformed traditional popular arts of the peasantry-as-"the people" movements established by the Chinese Communist Party cultural front from 1938 into the 1940s (see, e.g., Bohnenkamp 2021, De Mare 2015, Van Fleit Hang 2013). A year later, when the devastating famine caused by colonial policies of grain distribution began in Bengal, masses of rural people, hungry, and desperate, migrated into the cities. The IPTA's literary, visual, and dramatic productions of this period focused on depicting the experiences of this rural mass in exodus across the land, and on what the destitution of the famine meant for reconstituting the rural as part of a decolonized and liberated nation of "the people." The iconic peasant mother who could not feed her children and was forced to sell her body (or her daughter's) became a central trope symbolizing the fate of the nation (Loomba 2019, pp. 208, 210).

One powerful production of this era that foregrounds the linkage of the peasant mother's sexual honor to the question of rural-as-nation, is K.A. Abbas' 1946 film, *Dharti ke Lal/Children of the Earth*.¹³ *Dharti ke Lal* was the IPTA's first cinematic production and also the first Indian film to be screened in the Soviet Union (in 1949) and, later, in other socialist bloc countries (Loomba 2019, p. 224; Rajagopalan 2008, p. 27). The IPTA folk-form-based socialist realist style of the film, its stature within the space of this period's transnational socialist circulations, and its highlighting of the question of the peasant mother's sexual shame/honor in the making of the decolonized nation, all make it a powerful co-text that redirects a reading of the 1940 *Aurat* into the 1957 *Mother India*.

From the start, *Dharti ke Lal* symbolically connects the land/nation to women, especially mothers. This connection is imagistically extended out of the space of the village, when, during the climatic song of the film, "Bhooka hai Bengal"/Bengal is Hungry, a map of India is superimposed upon the image of a peasant woman who leads a procession of singers with their hands outstretched to the nation. This scene ushers the film to its ending as a national community sends aid, while the farmers themselves return to the village armed with the new hope of a plentiful future through collective farming and the transformation of unequal relations in the rural/national space.

Yet, this ending also directly confronts the question of the peasant mother's sexual honor and the making of this radically transformed new national collectivity. Radhika, the young mother and wife of Ramu, has sold her body for milk for her infant. At the same time, Ramu is compelled to become a pimp selling the bodies of other women. When the farmers return, Radhika and Ramu – now reunited and both having a shared shame – feel they do not have a place in the happy collectivity and transformed landscape in front of them. Although Ramu declares, "It is better for the villagers if they forgot us," Radhika counters, "Our village, our nation can never forget us. Our nation cannot forget us if there is never to be a time like this again."

At one level, the film seems to reject those who "dishonored," by selling, the mother/land body, into the space of a new liberated collectivity. At another level, however, it powerfully poses the question of what it would take for that liberated collectivity to include one such as Radhika. Here, the film evokes Lu Xun and Xiao Hong's questioning of what the liberation of the nation means for peasant women. These three works together expose a spectrum of contention within the rural/peasant/woman nexus writing the nation within the space of Indian and Chinese leftist esthetics in the period of anticolonial and socialist nationalisms. *Dharti ke Lal* also re-positions the transformed text of *Aurat* in *Mother India*, especially through the latter's more explicit linkage of the peasant mother as representative of the fate of the nation, and the question of what a liberated nation offers to her. I will return this nexus of co-texts, via *Mother India*, in the conclusion.

Transformations of the rural and the peasant mother in *Mother India*

Mehboob Khan's *Mother India*, through its unique combination of folk-theatre stylization and socialist realist esthetics, sharpens the narrative and visual focus on the forces of rural oppression that we already see in *Aurat* and *Dharti ke Lal*, while also radically transforming the image of the peasant mother as a symbol of Indian nation and womanhood. She is no longer solely a tragic victim but a powerful agent inaugurating the new nation, and she does so with her mother/body firmly connected to the mother/land. Yet, *Mother India*, too, may ask on what terms her agency within the space of the new nation is formulated.

Mother India opens with the story of Radha in the time and space of the new rural village at the heart of the liberated post-colonial nation-state. An old woman's face appears as a close-up, her skin

¹³ Abbas based his film script on one of the most popular IPTA plays of the Bengal Famine era, Bijon Bhattacharya's *Nabanna/New Harvest* (1944), and on another key work of the period, Krishan Chandar's Urdu novel *Annadata/Giver of Grain*. Both works connect the shame/honor of the peasant mother to the shame/honor of the nation as a whole, while *Nabanna* posits a solution through an aspiration for a new era of peasant collective power (although women play little part as agents in its formation). See Loomba 2019, pp. 212–23.

all wrinkled and resembling the earth, a clump of which she proceeds to pick up and hold to her heart. The scene shifts then to views of an industrializing rural landscape shaped by electric poles, jeeps, paved roads, large-farming vehicles, and finally, an irrigation dam under construction. The old woman is soon surrounded by her son and a group of official-looking men in white suits and caps, asking her to take the place of honor in opening the dam: “You are...the mother of the whole village. If you don’t participate, we can’t open the dam.” She goes with them haltingly, and when someone puts a garland of flowers over her head, the scene fades, to be replaced by a close-up of the woman as a young bride with garlands of flowers around her neck.

Thus begins Radha’s memory of her marriage day. But this time, unlike in *Aurat*, she overhears Sundar Chachi’s private confession about mortgaging the land right on her wedding night. Radha’s immediate knowledge of the debt and Sukhi-Lala’s more frequent and obvious presence adds a layer of intense foreboding onto the early sequences accompanied by song or dramatic musical scores. The second song sequence is grim and protracted, repeating a series of stylized tableaux of Radha and Shyamu’s sweaty physical labor and the theft of its produce through the transfer of increasingly large portions of every crop – from wheat to cotton – to Sukhi-Lala. A following sequence is an even more extreme focus on the taunted, stretched body parts, and strained faces of Radha and Shyamu as they try with everything they have to break through the unyielding earth of a fallow field over which Sukhi-Lala has no claim, in order to gain their independence from the cycle of debt and theft. At the peak of this effort, Shyamu’s arms are crushed under a massive boulder and he can no longer work in the fields. He leaves his family, not because he desires to mimic the rich (as in *The Mother*), or because he gives up in face of incessant immiseration (as in *Aurat*), but because he would just take scarce resources away from them unnecessarily.

Mother India heightens its already steady focus on Radha’s laboring body after Shyamu’s departure. This focus on Radha’s physicality is a drastic change from her depiction in *Aurat*. *Aurat*’s Radha is often viewed in close up, and looks worn, disheveled, and pale during the drought. But, she is never shown with the same focus on arms heaving, and panting body at work, covered in the earth that she labors on, as is the Radha of *Mother India*. Radha’s depiction as a “labor heroine” evokes depictions of peasant women at work featured in the internationally disseminated print and visual media of the Soviet Union, such as the magazines *Soviet Land* and *Soviet Woman* that circulated in India from the late 1940s on (Chakrabarti 2019, p. 244; Chatterjee 2002, p. 44). Such imagery was also dominant in the literary and visual productions of the early People’s Republic of China (PRC) (see, e.g., Chen 2003, Du 2017; Spakowski 2020). But, the Soviet and Chinese imagery was often accompanied by smiling faces or glowing cheeks, signaling labor in a society free from oppression, and unequal ownership of land. It also symbolized socialist women overcoming past ideas of weak and confined femininity (Chen 2003). Radha’s version of this imagery, if esthetically similar in shot style and choice of focus, is different, as hers is a physical labor of resistance, struggle, and determination to overcome nature and social oppression. Rather than overcoming a past gender-order of segregation and ideas of female inferiority through proud socialist public labor, Radha’s labor on the land is to protect her feminine honor and identity as mother. Her often upward and outward gaze resembles what has been defined as the “socialist realist gaze” of much communist iconography, but rather than gazing out to a liberated future, Radha’s gaze is one signaling her fierce struggle to protect her mother body/land (Donald 2000, p. 62).

The transformed visual esthetics in which Radha’s body becomes central in *Mother India* is also key to its new depiction of the dramatic natural disaster that reveals the extent of social oppression in the village. In *Mother India* the drought of both *The Good Earth* and *Aurat* becomes a devastating flood that ruins the harvest and soaks the land beyond recovery. Although the original version of *Mother India* also included scenes of villagers protesting at Sukhi-Lala’s hoarding of grain, the censors at the Film Bureau mandated their removal (Chatterjee 2002, p. 54). Yet, the idea of collective revolt remains integral to *Mother India*’s text, lingering in its tense narrative and visual esthetics. The village’s collective protest is re-embedded in Birju’s revenge at the end. Unlike his more disaffected and cynical revolt in *Aurat*, *Mother India*’s Birju actually burns Sukhi-Lala’s debt records – thus freeing the poor

from owing anyone who may come to claim Sukhi-Lala's possessions. More centrally, however, the communal revolt is placed upon Radha as a symbol of heroic resistance against all forces of oppression, and by making a dramatic symbolization of her body as mother/land.

Throughout the scenes of devastating drought and her desperate decision to submit to Sukhi-Lala's offer of sex in exchange for food for her children, Radha is covered head to toe in the mud of the earth, and becomes larger than life, even as Sukhi-Lala seeks to dominate her. In the end, her refusal and fierce attack with a stick on her oppressor propels Radha's power to save the integrity of the communal body as well. In a scene that evokes both the mass exoduses of the Partition and the Bengal Famine, Radha's face covers the entire screen as she gazes at the line of departing farmers across the horizon that is superimposed upon her image. Radha, first with a scythe over her shoulders, then with her arms outstretched and a clump of earth in her hands, sings to the departing villagers to stay and help her recover the fields: "Your mother is calling you, asking you to stay, with hands folded. The earth is your mother, after all." The villagers stop their exodus and, coming to her, they begin to dig at the earth alongside her. This sequence of collective recovery ends with a view of the mass of farmers forming, in a dance-like motion, the shape of the map of an undivided India. The image lasts for but an instant but it consolidates Radha as Mother India, Mother of the political community.

The imagistic connection between mother and land powerfully evokes the linked integrity of the peasant/mother/land that made its appearance in the cultural production of the Bengal Famine, and its cinematic iteration in *Dharti ke Lal*. This scene also shifts the terms of the civilizational woman-as-nation concept incorporated into Mayo's imperialist text. Here, the mother/land/nation are sites of struggle rather than eternal.

Finally, in its penultimate scene, *Mother India* both repeats and changes the nature of Birju's revolt and Radha's reasons for killing her own son from their versions in *Aurat*. For the villagers, for Ramu, and especially for Radha, Birju's act of burning Sukhi-Lala's debt records and killing him is enough. They plead with him to not touch Rupa, the daughter of the moneylender, who, while petulant and privileged, is not her father. But Birju is undeterred. In Radha's final encounter with her son, she declares, "I am a woman, and Rupa is a daughter of the village. She is my own honor." Radha shoots her son, and then as she looks at her blood-covered hands, the shot is superimposed with another, of earth-red waters flowing out of the newly inaugurated dam the film's liberated modern national present. The elderly Radha, garlanded and surrounded by men in white suits, looks over the fields. The camera focuses on her face, which is grim. She trembles, almost sobs, and the film ends with a long shot of her standing with the men surrounding her.

Conclusion: nationalist voice-over?

Mother India's changes to the penultimate scene from *Aurat*, together with its new opening and final scenes that place the story of Radha as peasant mother of the nation into the liberated new space of independent India, raise as many questions as they present answers to the way the peasant woman is sutured into a contested landscape of meanings of the nation across the imaginaries of India and China in the period from the mid-1920s to the 1950s. The imagination of the peasant woman as a symbol of the nation both joins and brings into contention the meanings of the rural and peasantry to the nation, and the question of women's gendered forms of liberation in the modern political community. Both discourses were imbricated in the way nationalist and socialist movements articulated the new emerging post-colonial state in India and the anti-imperialist socialist state in China. As we see through the works of Pearl Buck and Katherine Mayo, the rural question and the woman question also come together in a global discourse around India and China as representative of the rise of anti-colonial and socialist nations that challenged the modernization and civilizational authority of western-capitalist imperialisms.

In the late 1940s and 1950s both new states articulated cinema as a key domestic and international medium to promote the idea that "the nation-state's progress will lead to better living conditions" for the marginalized of the colonial and/or feudal past (Schulze 2002, p. 72; see also, e.g., Wang 2017,

p. 184). In India of the 1950s, the making of the nation as liberated space was to follow what Nehru termed in 1955 as “a socialist pattern of society” (Rajadhyaksha and Willemen 1994, p. 23), which included an emphasis on rural industrialization and the transformation of rural structures of exploitation (see, e.g., Duara and Perry 2018, p. 7). “Progressive” social films depicting the struggle for independent nationhood, its histories of oppression and hopes for a new society did not simply or directly follow state political goals of nation-building but continued to question and experiment with what Priyamvada Gopal describes as “the precise modalities” of the relationship between esthetics and politics (2005, p. 4), or what Sunderason has described as the shifting vocabularies of “partisan esthetics” in India’s long decolonization (2020, pp. 40–41). As such in a connected body of social and socialist realist productions, the nation remains “a terrain of struggle,’ a question of how to democratically build a new nation, with much still to change” (Gopal 2005, p. 14). Khan’s *Mother India* participates in this body of cinematic texts writing the nation. Yet, its central focus on the peasant woman as symbol and agent of the nation is also unique among its co-texts.¹⁴

The early PRC state similarly viewed cinema as a key medium projecting, at home and abroad, both the history of the people’s struggle against capitalist-imperialist, feudalist, and patriarchal exploitation, and the making of its new society as a liberated space through a transformation of political, social, and economic structures, under the guidance of the communist party (see e.g., Chen 2009, pp. 152–54; Ma 2016; Van Fleit 2013; Wang 2017, pp. 164, 167). In 1953, the Chinese state Film Bureau’s official list of subject matter to be included in new national cinema focused on depictions of rural modernization, peasant struggles, and the experiences of rural women striving for equal rights (Wang 2017, 184). The most iconic, internationally circulating, films of the PRC in the 1950s, emphasized peasant women as objects of past oppression, and subjects of revolutionary socialist transformation (Chen 153; Zheng 193).¹⁵ At the same time, as we note for the making of a leftist nationalist cinema in India, we see in these films, a space of dialog, tension, and sometimes separation between state goals and filmmakers’ translations of them onto the silver screen (see, e.g., Zheng 184–86).

A longer and much more sustained discussion of the articulation of the peasant women as symbols of the nation’s past, present, and future in the Chinese and Indian films of the 1950s is certainly warranted. Here, I reflect on the questions they raise through the texts I have already discussed throughout this paper. I focus, here, on the 1956 film adaptation of Lu Xun’s 1924 short story *Zhufu New Year’s Sacrifice* (directed by Sang Hu), and turn back to Xiao Hong’s 1935 novel *Shengsi chang/The Field of Life and Death*. The film adaptation of *New Year’s Sacrifice* read alongside *Mother India*, speaks to the shifting and conflicted political-esthetic vocabularies around the rural/peasant/woman nexus from the mid-1920s to the 1950s, in both Indian and Chinese literature and cinema. Between the two versions of *New Year’s Sacrifice*, we also see the tensions over defining the meaning of the political for the esthetic in this period. Xiao Hong’s novel, read alongside K.A. Abbas’ *Dharti ke Lal* and *Mother India*, opens up a more radical set of contestations over the smooth exchange between forms of liberation for the nation, the rural, the peasantry, and women that, I suggest, continues into the post-colonial and post-liberation eras.

The film adaptation of *New Year’s Sacrifice* was commissioned as part of a state campaign to promote the New Marriage Law of 1950, to showcase how it would change the tragic marriage practices of the “feudal” past (Wang 2017, p. 188). Yet, Lu Xun’s depiction of Xianglin’s wife and the extreme cruelty of the rural society she lives in, contradicted the expectation to depict heroic peasants (Wang 2017, p. 188). Thus, Xia Yan, the scriptwriter, made several changes to the Lu Xun’s text to

¹⁴See e.g., the body of neo- and socialist realist films that circulated in socialist and socialist-aligned countries, as well as festivals like Cannes and Venice, in this period, including *Do Bigha Zameen/Two Acres of Land* (Dir. Bimal Roy, 1953), *Chinnamull/The Uprooted* (Dir. Nemai Ghosh, 1950) and *Aandihyan/The Storm* (Dir. Chetan Anand, 1952). These films tend to make the peasant woman a symbolic extension of the male subaltern’s exploitation and struggle. The exception in terms of an actual focus on a peasant woman as an agent of revolutionary change (although she dies and is only a possible inspiration) is *Rahi/Two Leaves and a Bud* (Dir. K.A. Abbas, 1952).

¹⁵See e.g., *Zhonghua nüer/ Daughters of China* (Ling Zifeng 1949), *Bai mao nü/The White-Haired Girl* (Wang Bin 1950), *Zhufu/New Year’s Sacrifice* (Sang Hu 1956) *Muqin/The Mother* (Ling Zifeng 1956).

reconcile this contradiction, while also attempting to stay true to the original representation and its critical social realist impulse.¹⁶ The change I focus on is the addition of a voice-over at the beginning and end of the film that replaces the narrator's voice in Lu Xun's original story. At the start of the film, a male narrator declares that "The story happened long, long ago...." At the end of the film, as Xianglin's wife lays dying in the cold, the male voice appears once again, to declare, "This was an event of the past. Fortunately, those times have finally passed and will never return again."

The 1956 voice-over is a crucial change in the way this film suggests a view of the past and present of the peasant woman and the nation. It erases Lu Xun's implied critique of the narrator as a voice of social change and turns the viewer into a voyeur, watching the tragedy of the past unfold. It further speaks for Xianglin's wife, making her a "dead" image of the past. Despite its attention to contrasts between past and present, however, the voice-over appears as tacked on, a rather passive attempt to rewrite Lu Xun's story into the narrative of the new socialist nation as liberated space. In this sense, the film may not fully overcome Lu Xun's original text and instead reveal within itself a history of debates over esthetic form, the representation of subaltern subjects, and the meanings of a liberated nation that animated the Chinese leftist literary and cinematic spheres from the mid-1920s to the 1950s.

Like the 1956 *New Year's Sacrifice*, the 1957 *Mother India* also enacts a type of "voice over" of the experience of a peasant woman in the transition between "the old society" and the "new society." However, we may ask of this film, too, if the opening and final scenes can fully subsume the figure of the peasant woman into the new nation-state's own political narrative. Does the "patriotic visual labor" (Ramaswamy 2010, p. 5) of these scenes erase what is perhaps a more fraught representation that emerges out of the film's own engagement and dialog with a terrain of political-esthetic debates over ideas of nation and the place of the rural, the peasantry, and women as subjects of the nation? By making the peasant woman the dominant subject defining the liberation of the nation through the rural, what questions around this suturing is the film unable to resolve, or recuperate into a singular narrative?

In K.A. Abbas' 1946 *Dharti ke Lal*, Radhika asks if the nation's memory of "lost ones" such as herself will lead to the making of new social relations that would not repeat their tragedy. Although the ending may suggest the film's inability to go beyond a patriarchal-masculinist concept of women's sexual honor, by not simply allowing Radhika and her husband to join the new collectivity, the film stops short of celebrating the triumph of the new collective. Rather than a space of consolidation, then, the nation remains a site of contestation. I suggest that in an even more conflicted and indirect way, *Mother India's* Radha may pose a similar question.

Radha's most desperate moment – her sexual encounter with Sukhi-Lala – is the result of a collusion of forces of oppression that leaves the peasant woman/mother with few sources of survival. Although deeply steeped in a patriarchal language of women's "honor" and the maintenance of the village's moral surveillance over women's bodies, her refusal of Sukhi-Lala is simultaneously a refusal to submit to enforced sexual service by her oppressor. Her declaration to Birju is also a refusal to allow the male revolt against an oppressive social order to be conducted over the bodies of women. Birju frees the villagers from debt but, as a potential liberator, he assumes his right to kidnap Rupa as a prize, or as a final act of revenge against the class oppressor, an assumption that Radha rejects. Birju sees Rupa as the daughter of the oppressor, while Radha declares her a daughter of the village. Being a daughter of the village certainly places Rupa into a new order of possession and authority over her; the village, like the nation, is not an automatic space for feminist revolution. Yet, this declaration pulls women away from being simple extensions of the men who possess them. The film, if weakly, asks, through the elderly Radha's barely standing posture at the end, surrounded by men and machines remaking the rural as national space, what this new space offers to women, if it changes anything for them?

¹⁶For a more detailed study of the changes the 1956 film made to Lu Xun's original text, see Wang (2017, pp. 189–92).

Mother India evokes not only the questions posed by Radhika's departure and the imagination of the future in *Dharti Ke Lal*, but also the much more radical questioning of the automatic linkage between the liberations of the rural/peasant/woman in the nation in Xiao Hong's *The Field of Life and Death*. In both *Mother India* and *The Field of Life and Death*, the peasant woman's body is mapped, harshly and with effort, onto the body of the nation. Through Golden Bough's story and her own suggestive cover image of the novel, Xiao Hong severs a smooth exchange between rural woman and nation, without completely abandoning the latter as a possibility for the former. In *Mother India*, Radha becomes symbol of India through her grim struggle in the very earth of the nation to build something out of it. But, the final mapping of the peasant woman into the liberated space of the nation is here also incomplete at best.

Where have we thus come, in the end, in this mapping of the connected history of representations of the peasant woman as embodiment of the Indian and Chinese nations – their past, present and future – within their specific anticolonial and socialist political-esthetic movements and within a larger global sphere of such representations and the debates over them during an era of “the global restructuring of the imperial formation” (Sinha 2006, p. 34)? From the shared space of encounters with Pearl Buck's 1931 novel, *The Good Earth* and its variations or transmedial projections in both Chinese and Indian anti-colonial and nationalist leftist cultural spheres, we have opened up a larger transnational leftist cultural space of Indian and Chinese co-texts that speak to each other in terms of the shifting vocabularies of their representations of the peasant woman as embodiment of the nation, of the relationship between the political and the aesthetic, and how the aesthetic intervenes, shapes and imagines the political project of “liberating” the people, the nation. One can become lost in the intricate and fascinating history of textual resonances, encounters, and transformations. But, what, ultimately, does a globally-situated connected India–China history of the tensions inherent in the figure of the peasant woman as embodiment of the nation, or the way this figure brings together the interlinked yet contending representations of the rural, the peasantry and women as subjects and symbols of the nation offer that a single-nation view (India or China) may not? My contention is that the encounters and shared body of co-texts I have mapped here form part of a shared temporality in which the meanings of the Indian and Chinese nations were deeply connected within a global imaginary, specifically around questions of the rural, the peasantry, and women as the sites/subjects that defined the fate of the nation in each case, and around the types of esthetic and political vocabularies that could be mobilized to represent these subjects and their “liberation” within the nation. By understanding the connected India–China imaginary around the meanings and stakes of the liberated nation, we may re-encounter a contested and dynamic history of ideas of the nation and its subjects, that cannot be, in any simple sense, “voiced over” by singular nationalist narratives.

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