

Performance Research

A Journal of the Performing Arts

ISSN: 1352-8165 (Print) 1469-9990 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rprs20>

Performing Socialism at Altitude

Maggie Greene

To cite this article: Maggie Greene (2019) Performing Socialism at Altitude, Performance Research, 24:2, 63-72, DOI: [10.1080/13528165.2019.1624030](https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2019.1624030)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2019.1624030>



Published online: 25 Jul 2019.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Performing Socialism at Altitude

Chinese expeditions to Mount Everest, 1958–1968

MAGGIE GREENE

Between 1966 and 1968, Chinese scientists, professors, climbers and members of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) undertook an expedition to Mount Everest. It was not the first Chinese expedition to the world's highest mountain; in May 1960, a Chinese team made a successful ascent from the Tibetan side of the mountain, seven years after Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay had made the first summit from the south. But the goal of the 'Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS) Tibetan Scientific Expedition Team' was not to summit; instead, they were to conduct an in-depth exploration of the area's geology, geography, flora and fauna. Such an expedition may seem standard enough at first glance. However, it was launched at the beginning of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966–76) and overlapped with the early phase of the mass movement that helped plunge the People's Republic of China (PRC) into chaos for several years. In a period where high-ranking Chinese Communist Party (CCP) members, professors, teachers and many regular people were facing vicious criticism, imprisonment and even death, a scientific expedition to the world's highest peak seems out of place.

Yet the CAS expedition provides an intriguing look at the uses of mountaineering in domestic Chinese political and cultural life, particularly in the photographic record it left behind. And it was not the first expedition to Everest to take place in times of political upheaval, nor the first to be used for political ends. Indeed, the first successful Chinese ascent of the mountain took place during the Great Leap Forward (1958–60), the ambitious political campaign designed to push the PRC into a new era of achievement in all areas of life. What better representation of the success of the first decade of Communist rule than a Chinese team summiting the world's highest mountain, the very first from the Tibetan side? However, in hindsight, the summit is not a crowning achievement

of an exuberant period in Chinese history. It instead reads as a tragic contrast between images of strong Chinese bodies 'conquering' an 8,000-metre peak and the tens of millions who starved to death in the rest of the country, victims of a policy-driven famine of devastating scale.

This article is a preliminary exploration of the 'performance' of Chinese socialism at altitude. That is, it analyses the ways in which these two Chinese expeditions were used to highlight, reinforce and display socialist achievements to domestic and international audiences through images of human beings simultaneously conquering Everest and engaging in practices associated with 'building socialism'. I am particularly attentive to the cultural manifestations of these expressions in the form of literature and visual culture. Chinese expeditions were used as metaphors for socialist advances, presented visions of the PRC as strong, healthy and harmonious, and were used to glorify CCP achievements. They also reveal unintended performances of CCP goals and values, such as a distinctly imperial gaze on the province of Tibet. While the varied political and cultural uses are not unique to the PRC, they add a rich layer to the global history of mountaineering, showing the similarities between Western and Chinese uses of 'mountains of dreams' (such as the British pursuit of Mount Everest, or the German obsession with Nanga Parbat) in political and cultural contexts. At the same time, these expeditions provide unique insight into periods of great social, political and cultural upheaval in the PRC and often show an unexpected side of 'making revolution'.

As historian Brian J. DeMare has argued, much of Maoist political practice centred on highly dramatic, ritualized performances (DeMare 2015: 19–20). There was a 'theatricality' to Maoism, in which people constantly deployed set pieces and took on roles therein, as though the

drama of revolution took place in every moment of life – even when climbing at 8,000 metres. Using a variety of contemporaneous sources, this article considers the role of performance in promulgating messages about mountaineering and socialism. An examination of the Chinese case elucidates the connections between politics and mountaineering as mediated and expressed through literary, theatrical and visual media, and the varied ways in which mountaineering has been deployed in a context beyond the typical Western-centric view of mountaineering in the Himalayas.

FLYING TO THE SUMMIT: THE GREAT LEAP FORWARD

Throughout the 1950s, a variety of Chinese mountaineering expeditions were launched, with the eventual goal of putting Chinese climbers on the top of Mount Everest (generally known as Zhumulangma in Chinese, a transliteration of the Tibetan Chomolangma). Conquering Everest was one more in a series of lofty goals that the

Maoist regime proclaimed in explicit defiance of Western imperialism and that came to a head during the Great Leap Forward. In the autumn of 1957, Mao was preparing to launch China into an ambitious new era when he met with other communist leaders in Moscow to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution. There, the charismatic chairman made a bold and fateful pronouncement: China would economically overtake the United Kingdom's steel production in a mere fifteen years (MacFarquhar 1983: 17). The late summer and autumn of the next year were the high point of a plan that was to turn China into an industrial powerhouse and begin the transition to communism. Communes were set up in the countryside, and the national economic priority turned to the production of iron and steel – financed on the backs of the peasants and the precious grain they raised. But the Great Leap Forward was not simply to be a jump forward for China's economic development. Rather, it was a 'leap' for socialism in all areas of life, and it was no accident that an expedition to Everest was launched in this atmosphere.

A 1959 official publication entitled *Wearing Down Eternal Snows on Icy Mountains* placed mountaineering squarely in the context of the Leap: it was to 'serve the economic construction and national defence construction of the motherland' (Hu 1959: 2). Initially, attempts to scale peaks above 6,000 metres were largely joint Sino-Soviet expeditions. Throughout the 1950s, Chinese and Soviet mountaineers went to the Pamirs (climbing Pik Edinstva and Pik Oktobrskiyi in 1955), the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in the PRC (Muztagh Ata in 1956), and even an expedition to Pik Lenin in 1958 that included five Chinese women (Hu 1959: 2–3). Indeed, the performance of mountaineering in this 1959 booklet, both in photos and accompanying illustrations, is one of global socialist cooperation, harmony, science and athletic achievement.

Representations of the performance of Chinese citizens on high mountains both in and outside of China were put in service of lofty goals and even loftier claims. Just as Western powers used the performance of their most gifted mountaineers as points of national pride, Chinese mountaineering

■ Cover of *Eternal Snows*.



achievements were used to present socialism in a positive light. It is clear from many publications in the late 1950s that, just like with other athletic advancements, Chinese mountaineers were used to refute powerful stereotypes regarding the health – or lack thereof – of Chinese bodies and, by extension, the Chinese body politic (Shuman 2018:221). Beginning in the nineteenth century, China had been painted as the backward ‘Sick Man of East Asia’ (Heinrich 2008:16). Quite in contrast, then, were images published in the 1950s that showed Chinese climbers successfully negotiating mountains such as Sichuan’s highest peak, Mount Gongga (Minya Konka) in 1957. Such expeditions, crowd *Eternal Snows*, ‘totally smashed’ the ‘slandorous speech’ of the prophets of America ‘and other capitalist countries’ that ‘Chinese people can’t summit the highest mountains’ (Hu 1959:3). Soon, mountaineering would be put in service to much more.

Chinese mountaineers undertook smaller-scale expeditions just as intellectuals and artists threw themselves into creating topical poems, exhortatory essays and even plays about the Leap. The art and literature of the period reflect this exuberance: propaganda posters of unimaginable abundance and prosperity testify to the grandiose vision of the campaign spoils. In March 1958, the well-known poet and dramatist Meng Chao typified these feelings in a short poem, published in *People’s Daily*, the main mouthpiece of the CCP. Entitled ‘A Short Melody of the Great Leap Forward’, it ended by drawing explicit connections between the Leap and mountaineering (Meng 1958):

This era is already different than those before,
It seems like riding an elevator up a mountain;
You who always have many kinds of misgivings,
Watch us fly to the summits of the Himalayas!¹

An expedition to the highest mountain in the world, then, was well in keeping with the general atmosphere and rhetoric of 1958. Meng Chao’s exhortation that doubters should ‘watch us fly to the summits of the Himalayas!’ took on a tangible quality. Illustrations included in *Eternal Snows* show climbers helping one another while holding aloft the flag of the PRC, several images of climbers working together in a convivial manner and, in the image that closes the book, a lone mountaineer with a flag lashed to his ice axe,



■ Drawings from *Eternal Snows*



ringed by other peaks – each bearing the ‘Five-Star Red Flag’ (Hu 1959: 12, 16, 18, 27).

Despite this exuberant start, by 1959 the lofty language and promises of the Leap’s launch degenerated into a man-made disaster of a nearly unimaginable scale. Mao’s statement that the PRC would overtake the United Kingdom in steel production meant that experienced rural labour was temporarily funnelled into backyard factories. At the same time, the national leadership was

¹ All translation in this article is by Maggie Greene.

receiving reports of massive crop yields, and it was on these reports that the state requisitions were determined (Friedman et al. 1991: 226–8). Furthermore, as Yang Jisheng has described, priority was given to feeding urban populations and importing machinery, thus ‘grain was all but snatched from peasant mouths’ – even as it became apparent food scarcity was a serious issue in rural areas (Yang 2012: 19).

Top leaders soon realized that a crisis was unfolding. A year after the Leap had been set in motion, reports indicated that the situation in the countryside was dire and action needed to be taken to prevent the disaster from deepening. The Minister of Defence, Peng Dehuai, suggested privately to Mao in the summer of 1959 that the peasants were suffering and a change in policy was needed; for this, he was dismissed from his post and publicly humiliated (Yang 2012: 355–88). Despite the warnings, the situation worsened before it got better. In the end, the famine of the Great Leap Forward, ‘a disaster which Mao and his colleagues had wrought in their hubris’, killed in excess of thirty million people due to policy decisions that could have been stopped (MacFarquhar 1997: 5). Even after measures were taken to correct a disastrous course, the Leap effectively came to an end in 1960.

Against this backdrop, the 1960 summit of Everest was one shining success in a sea of horrendous failures. On 25 May 1960, a team consisting of Wang Fuzhou, Gonpo (a Tibetan) and Qu Yinghua summited from the north side, making the first successful ascent of the mountain from Tibet (Guo 1960). It was immediately used, even in the midst of what would come to be known as the ‘Three Years of Hardship’, to bolster claims about the success of Chinese socialism and the Leap. The party secretary of the mountaineering team, Shi Zhanchun, noted shortly after the expedition came to a close: ‘The successful ascent of Mount Everest is a victory for the “Three Red Banners”, the General Line, the Great Leap Forward, and People’s Communes’ (Guo 1960: 1–2). A late-1960 volume, designed for popular release, provides a lengthy narrative, as well as many photos taken during the expedition. The text is dramatic and fitting for the language of the Leap, being filled with many expressions of ‘pressing forward’ and ‘overcoming difficulties’.

The photographs, though grainy, show expedition members performing socialism in just the ways the exuberant language of the early Leap had described: the ascent of Everest was the collective activity of the Chinese people, meaning Chinese workers’ bodies, moving in mass coordination towards a new achievement. There is a heavy emphasis on a kind of collective identity, with relatively few photographs focusing only on the three climbers who had summited. The Everest expedition was a large group, in keeping with the ideals of the Leap. As a post-ascent announcement noted, *fifty-three* members of the team reached at least 7,600 metres on the mountain (all of whom would be heralded for ‘breaking national records’) (‘Zhongguo dengshan’ 1960). In a time emphasizing a transition from socialism to communism, collectivization of the countryside, and mass movements to overcome great obstacles, the image of a literal mass of Chinese climbers moving up the side of Everest is one that resonated strongly with the rhetoric of the day.

Further, if the climbers were not ‘flying’ to the summit of a Himalayan mountain, as Meng Chao had described in 1958, they were at least making impressive-looking achievements on the world’s highest mountain. In addition to the work of climbing the mountain, many other images show the scientific exploration of the Everest region. Thus, the expedition was a microcosm of the larger project of the Leap – or at least how it had been presented in 1958. Thoroughly modern, as attested by their equipment and oxygen gear, and thoroughly socialist, the members of the expedition were performing a vision of Chinese socialism that was already on par with Western and Soviet expeditions.

The summit was celebrated not just in news releases, narratives of the expedition and photographs. In an issue of *New Sport*, the premier journal for reporting on all manner of physical activity, Meng Chao – the same poet who had, in 1958, drawn parallels between the Great Leap Forward and ‘fly[ing] to the summits of the Himalayas’ – returned with an explicit celebration of this Chinese achievement. It was an odd venue for Meng: although he had made his name as a poet and writer in the left-wing literary circles of 1920s and 1930s Shanghai, his work

tended towards subjects far from sports. His most famous literary product would be an exquisitely lyrical play (and possible critique of CCP policy during the Leap) distilled from a sixteenth-century original, which premiered a year after his poem about Everest. But even if he harboured misgivings about the Great Leap Forward, he proved himself to be able to perform the role of a loyal socialist writer in print, as he dramatically imagined the perils and triumphs of the Everest expedition and its import for the PRC. Mixing poetic forms with seemingly non-poetic subjects was quite common in high socialist publications. The first stanza of the poem celebrates the climbers alone. He describes the ‘iron gate of the North Col’, ‘ice axes like iron ploughs’, ‘crampons like sharp knives’ (Meng 1960: 18). Then the brave climbers overcome the obstacles in their path:

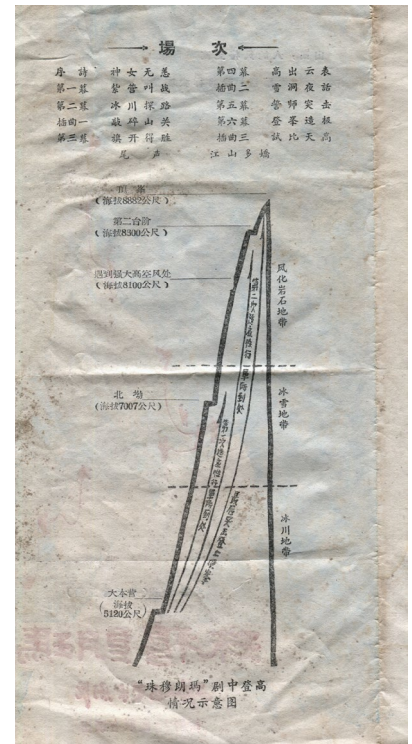
The oxygen is exhausted,
 Heroic spirit fills up their minds;
 Their physical strength used up,
 Heroic willpower surpasses the east wind.

Even with this dramatic opening, the poet did not really get rolling until the second stanza. Here, Meng Chao moves from the specific climb to Chinese socialism at large:

Red light has arisen in China,
 Chinese earth has brought forth heroes.
 Heroes have climbed one of the highest peaks,
 What high peak is left that cannot be climbed!
 The heroes have produced a great miracle,
 What miracles are left that cannot be achieved!

Certainly, Chinese writers were not the first to celebrate individual achievement as a national triumph. However, as Meng Chao’s poem unfurled, he deployed the allegory on an even grander scale. This was not simply about a country’s pride in three nationals making a successful ascent of the world’s highest peak – rather, it reflected on the ‘success’ of Chinese socialism at large. The mountaineering party was not simply those who had participated in the expedition, it was *the entire country*:

Six hundred million heroes
 Are just one mountaineering party
 Climbing mountain after mountain
 Climbing range after range
 Six hundred million heroes
 Gathered atop a high summit,
 Both calling out to the rain and shouting to the wind!



■ Front and back of Zhumulangma playbill

Both subduing tigers and bringing down dragons.
 The party is the supreme commander,
 The masses are the advance lines,
 Mao Zedong raises a hand and beckons
 Six hundred million fill China with red decorations.

This performance of socialism is an impressive, and quite lyrical, one. As in the photographs in *Eternal Snows* that showed the masses labouring together to achieve the peak, here Meng Chao celebrates the socialist project and the PRC at large through images of the collective, spontaneous and voluntarist advancement of proletarian Chinese bodies across a landscape formerly dominated by Western imperialists.

Meng Chao was not the only writer to turn his attention to the Everest expedition. In 1961, Ding Li published ‘Ah! Zhumulangma’, a lengthy narrative poem lacking much of the elegance of Meng Chao’s effort (Ding 1961: 54–5). However, by the second half of the poem, Ding is actively addressing the mountain itself, while celebrating Chinese achievements vis-à-vis ‘foreigners’ (55):

Ah, the many kinds of astonishments
 of Zhumulangma!
 You are the kingdom of ice,
 You are the hometown of snow.
 For many years,

■ Members of the 1966-68 expedition having a snack and reading the *Little Red Book*.



Foreign 'explorers' thought to scale from the north side,
They climbed many times, yet could not ascend you.
They say this place is 'a doomed route',
Is 'the most dangerous place' ...

By highlighting foreign 'failures', the poet presents Chinese climbers – and socialism more broadly – as more tenacious, ambitious and ultimately successful than their foreign counterparts. The poem, which largely describes the actions of the climbers in a straightforward way, versus Meng Chao's more imaginative allegory, renders the physical performance of the mountaineers into a literary format.

In 1962, the Shanghai People's Art Theatre, a spoken-language drama troupe, produced a play simply titled *Zhumulangma*, and quite literally performed socialism and mountaineering on the stage. A review in *Shanghai Theatre* in March 1962 did not simply enthuse about the production, but the whole of the Chinese mountaineering project. *Zhumulangma* was a highly fictionalized account – to say the least – of the 1960 expedition that included 'female mountain spirits' and the ghosts of 'foreign explorers' ('1949–1963 Shanghai' 1967). Nevertheless, the review praised the production for presenting the 'high willpower, the high bearing, the high moral character' of the expedition's 'mountaineering heroes' (Yang 1962: 17). That is, the dramatic setting and the values read on to the *actual* mountaineers and the 1960 expedition could serve to inspire audiences. By performing, in a theatrical sense, an expedition to Everest for urban audiences, the People's Art Theatre rendered the performance of the 1960 expeditioners even more visible, ice axes, oxygen bottles and all. In so doing, they highlighted the utility of mountaineering,



particularly high-altitude mountaineering, to the Chinese socialist project. The actors performing the play were both acting out mountaineering for audiences, and – just like the expedition itself – performing a politically perfect, noble and modern vision of Chinese socialism. And, unlike the poetic performances of Meng Chao and Ding Li, the People's Art Theatre rendered the spectacle of socialist mountaineering – including the ice axes, oxygen bottles and modern expeditionary equipment – visible and physical for Shanghaiese audiences, far from the snow and glaciers of Tibet. This is similar to the 'theatrical and cinematic spectacle' of the 1965 propaganda song and dance epic *The East is Red* (Chen 2016: 63), which dramatized the history of the CCP, from the founding of the party to the establishment of the PRC in 1949. For audiences all over China, the film made visible an idealized portrait of revolution, including the spectre of war, guns, cannons and all. As literary scholar Chen Xiaomei describes, an examination of the film 'reveals how the imaginary accounts of revolutionary history blended past with present and manipulated historical "records" in a theater space' (64). *Zhumulangma* likewise provided audiences with a fictionalized account of the Everest expedition, blending fact and fiction within a framework of sanitized, idealized history in order to promulgate a particular vision of the achievements of the young socialist state.

MAKING REVOLUTION AT ALTITUDE: THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION

Six years after the Leap ended with a whimper, another expedition was sent to Mount Everest, and, once again, a mountaineering party was put in service to a politically turbulent period. Mao,

who had retreated from the political scene in the wake of the Great Leap's abject failure, grew increasingly displeased throughout the early 1960s with what he saw as a turning away from radical leftist views. His wife, Jiang Qing, saw that Mao's displeasure with the cultural world and top party members presented opportunities to enhance her political and cultural prominence. The climax of Mao's and Jiang's years-long attempt to forcibly remake the Chinese cultural world was the launch of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in 1966, which, despite its name, impacted all areas of life.

The Cultural Revolution was 'by far the most ambitious attempt at dealing with revisionism ever attempted by the CCP' (MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2006: 40). As the conflict played out in an increasingly high-profile and frenzied manner, with rallies, struggle sessions and the appearance of the youthful Red Guards, ever more high-level members of the CCP apparatus fell from power (54–61). The photographic record of the early (1966–8) period of the Cultural Revolution is a familiar one: Buddhist relics in flames, cadres wearing placards humiliated in front of ominous-looking crowds, students marching in the streets. It is a period associated with violence, destruction, the closure of educational institutions and an upending of societal norms.

The early phase of the Cultural Revolution saw vicious attacks on many intellectuals and cadres from the top echelons of the party, all the way down to average people in the most rural of villages, and many in between. Even so, the same period saw the launch of a scientific expedition to Mount Everest and surrounding areas. Dubbed the CAS Tibetan Scientific Expedition Team, the group was made up of members from research, industry, education, the PLA and the Chinese mountaineering team. Like many similar expeditions conducted by Western countries, the stated goals were academic in nature, including studies of Tibetan 'geology, fossils, Quaternary geology, physical geography, modern glaciers and landforms, meteorology and solar radiation, organisms and high mountain physiology' (Zhumulangma 1974: n.p.). Nevertheless, like those Western expeditions, this one served to perform both the PRC's territorial claims and its

claims to revolutionary progress.

The lavish photobook (published in 1974) that commemorated the CAS expedition, however, reveals much about Chinese goals and the performance of socialism during the trip, for domestic and international audiences alike. The book was published in Chinese, but also received an English edition in 1974. By the standards of the day, at least for Chinese print publications, it was a very fancy production: it includes colour as well as black and white photos, reproduced to a high standard, such as a spectacular three-leaf pull-out panoramic shot of the West Rongbuk Glacier.

The photos are a melange of subjects. From dramatic shots of surrounding mountains taken from 8,100 metres on Everest's flank, to detailed photos of fossils, flora and fauna, to photographs of local villagers, they document life on the expedition and scientific research, as well as the diverse landscape. The photographs also reveal a picture of Chinese socialism that is markedly different from many photographs taken during the same period. Far from the violence-laden and ominous images that are often associated with the early Cultural Revolution, the expedition group presents a picture of a productive, friendly and even fun Chinese socialism.

One of the most important parts of the performance was depicting ethnic harmony among expedition members. The first image that focuses on people, rather than the landscape, is a colour photograph of five men, dressed in down suits, sitting outside their tent. Three of them hold copies of the *Quotations of Chairman Mao* (the so-called 'Little Red Book'), and one

■ Han and Tibetan members of the 1966-68 expedition having a sing-along.





■ Local Tibetans pointing out geographical features to members of the 1966-68 expedition.

reads to the others with some enthusiasm. The caption draws explicit attention to the ethnicities of the assembled men, noting that 'At more than 6,100 metres, Tibetan and Han expedition members study the works of Chairman Mao together'. In contrast to the relatively difficult political situation of Tibet, the photos selected for inclusion show ethnic harmony both on a grand scale – as shown by the dramatic setting – and in the intimate – as expedition members take on the roles of Mao's dutiful students, building their multi-ethnic community around Mao Zedong Thought.

A similar image, labelled 'Cheerful Camp Life', shows a group of eight men – seven seated by tents, while one stands and directs – singing, several with broad smiles on their faces. The scene looks not unlike a Boy Scout campout. The additional caption explains that 'Tibetan and Han expedition members, at the high mountain camp at 5,900 metres, singing to their hearts' content'. This is not simply a casual singalong, but a presentation of multiple aspects of Chinese socialism, at least in the way the party wanted it to be presented. Mountaineers, the photograph suggests, have the energy and enthusiasm for Maoism necessary to form a harmonious choir of revolutionary voices, coordinated happily under the direction of ideological leadership. The expedition members are performing an image of strife-free ethnic solidarity, while even making the expedition – and by extension, the socialist project – look like productive, scientific fun.

It is not only ethnic harmony among expedition members on display in the photographs; there are also many scenes showing members interacting with locals from around Tibet. In a photograph reminiscent of propaganda that showcased agricultural abundance during the Leap, two traditionally dressed women of the Mongpo minority display their 'bumper harvest of a rice paddy' (*Zhumulangma* 1974: n.p.). On the facing page, expedition members help Tibetan peasants thresh highland barley – providing another image of ethnic, as well as class, harmony. Such images are powerful performances of both good revolutionary behaviour as well as the comfortable material conditions Tibet putatively enjoyed under party rule. Other photographs show 'liberated serfs' pointing out sites of ore deposits and geographical features to expedition members, and Tibetan herders prodding their yaks along, hauling supplies in support of the expedition.

However, in two important ways, the photos illustrate sides of Chinese socialism that were probably *not* intended. First, the socialism seen in *Zhumulangma* is an overwhelmingly masculine one. This is an unexpectedly revealing performance of socialist norms. Despite the emphasis on issues of gender in CCP policy, as historian Gail Hershatter has pointed out, 'The figure of Woman as state subject was ubiquitous in the written record', but 'named women ... were scarce' (Hershatter 2011: 3). In the published visual record of the 1966–8 expedition, 'Woman' is virtually absent from the photobook *and* named women are entirely absent. In fact, the only women who appear in the 1974 book are unnamed local Tibetan villagers.

The other revealing feature of many photographs is that they illustrate a colonial gaze on both Tibetan people and the landscape, thus underscoring the similarity of the Chinese expedition to Western ones. A number of scholars have described Tibet as one type of 'contact zone', in the usage of Mary Louise Pratt, an idea that configures relations between people 'in terms of co-presence, interaction ... and often within radically asymmetrical relations of power' (2008: 8). Certainly, we can see evidence of this type of 'co-presence', as well as power relations. As discussed above, several photographs show

expedition members performing proper socialist behaviour by relying on the knowledge of locals, as well as helping with agricultural tasks. Yet, locals (particularly Tibetan and minority women) are presented in a relatively exotic manner, especially in regard to their colourful, ‘traditional’ clothing, quite different from the drab clothing worn by the expedition. The Tibetans who guide the expedition are ‘liberated serfs’. The term itself points to the PRC’s destruction of the monastic system that kept Tibetan farmers bound to the land, but it also casts the Tibetan subjects in the photographs in the role of grateful helpers. The Tibetan landscape, likewise, is presented in multiple ways: dramatic, different, mysterious – there is an exceptionally striking two-page photograph of a conifer forest backed by a ‘sea of clouds’, which looks practically otherworldly. But Tibet is also presented in terms of its potential productivity for the Chinese state. The four opening two-page spreads depict the expansive, pristine environment of the Rongbuk Glacier, Everest and surrounding mountains. The final four pages, in stark contrast, show raw lumber, a lumber-processing facility, and the ‘urban’ development in Lhasa.

Zhumulangma thus shows Tibet and its people as the pristine, exotic and grateful objects of Chinese-led development. For a book that goes to some pains to underscore the vision of Chinese socialism and the Chinese state as ethnically harmonious and one peaceable, productive whole, it bears a striking resemblance to the projections of colonialist fantasy left behind by Western colonial powers in the years before 1949. The anonymity of the individuals in the photographs permits the text and the viewer to cast them in roles in the drama of socialism: some are scientific modernizers who drive the state project forward; others are grateful members of the liberated masses; and all participate enthusiastically in set pieces of socialist practice, studying, singing and working together.

PERFORMING SOCIALISM AT ALTITUDE

Ultimately, the performance of Chinese mountaineering in the high socialist period mirrors uses of mountaineering among Western countries: bolstering the state, underscoring

the strength of the nation and ‘competing’ (via expeditions, but particularly through a handful of the most skilled climbers) in an international competition for ‘world’s firsts’. Although the CCP put mountaineering narratives in service to the state, many elements – particularly in the photographic record – prove unusually revealing regarding less visible aspects of the Maoist political project. In particular, the literary, theatrical and visual performance of Chinese mountaineering underscores that the Maoist gaze is an essentially imperial gaze: it orders bodies into assigned roles (from liberated serf to scientist to mountaineer) in order to act out an idealized view of building Chinese socialism from the perspective of the party-state. The media produced for expeditions present a highly idealized view of the Chinese state building enterprise. Further, the inherent ‘drama’ of high-altitude mountaineering, wherein humans tested themselves against extreme elements and altitude, was put in service to the highly theatrical Maoist political process. Finally, the ‘performance’ of mountaineering in Chinese politics and culture proves illuminating on the global reach and importance of mountaineering, the uses of mountaineering performances (both literal and figurative) in Chinese society and finally – as in the case of the 1966–8 expedition – often provides a different picture of a heated political time.



■ Expedition member inspecting the Tibetan harvest.

REFERENCES

- Chen, Xiaomei (2016) *Staging Chinese Revolution: Theater, film, and the afterlives of propaganda*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Demare, Brian J. (2015) *Mao's Cultural Army: Drama troupes in China's rural revolution*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ding Li (1961) 'A! Zhumulangma – Changshi 'Tatian qu' diyizhang', *Changjiang wenyi* 12: 54–5.
- Friedman, Edward, Paul G. Pickowicz and Mark Selden (1991) *Chinese Village, Socialist State*, New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Guo Chaoren (1960) *Hongqi chashang Zhumulangma feng*, Beijing: Renmin tiyu chubanshe.
- Guo Jian, Yongyi Song and Yuan Zhou (2006) *Historical Dictionary of the Chinese Cultural Revolution*, Lanham: Scarecrow Press.
- Hershatter, Gail (2011) *The Gender of Memory: Rural women and China's collective past*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Heinrich, Ari Larissa (2008) *The Afterlife of Images: Translating the pathological body between China and the West*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Hu Lin (1959) *Tapo bingshan wannian xue*, Beijing: Renmin tiyu chubanshe.
- MacFarquhar, Roderick (1983) *The Great Leap Forward 1958–1960*, vol. 2 of *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- MacFarquhar, Roderick (1997). *The Coming of the Cataclysm: 1961–1966*, vol. 3 of *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1997.
- MacFarquhar, Roderick, and Michael Schoenhals (2006) *Mao's Last Revolution*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Meng Chao (1958) 'Dayuejin duanqu', *Renmin ribao*, 29 March.
- Meng Chao (1960) 'Feishang shijie dingfeng de wuying – song pangdeng Zhumulangmafeng de yingxiongmen', *Xin tiyu* 12: 18.
- '1949–1963 Shanghai yanchu de guixi' 1949–1963 (1967) [Ghost plays performed in Shanghai between 1949 and 1963], *Wenyi zhanbao*, 5 July.
- Pratt, Mary Louise (2008) *Imperial Eyes: Travel writing and transculturation*, 2nd edn, London: Routledge.
- Shuman, Amanda (2018) 'No longer "sick": Visualizing "victorious" athletes in 1950s Chinese films', *Historical Social Research* 43(2): 220–50.
- Yang Jisheng (2012) *Tombstone: The great Chinese famine, 1958–1962*, eds Edward Friedman, Guo Jian and Stacy Mosher, trans. Stacy Mosher and Guo Jian, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Yang Ming (1962) 'Huaju 'Zhumulangma' de chengjiu yu buzu', *Shanghai xiju* 3: 17–19.
- 'Zhongguo dengshandui zai zhengfu Zhumulangma feng de guochengzhong you wushisan ming yundongyuan dapo dengshan gao du de quanguo jiliu' (1960) *Renmin ribao*, 4 June.
- Zhongguo kexueyuan Xizang kexue kaochadui (1974) *Zhumulangma feng ditu kexue kaocha tupianji*, Beijing: Kexue chubanshe.