
The USIS, China, and the Postwar Order: The Film Catalog as Archive Map

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The organization known as the United States Information Service (USIS) came into existence in China in December of 1941, when the Foreign Information Service (FIS) under the Office of the Coordinator of Information (COI) appointed the journalist F. McCracken Fisher to head an office in Chongqing, the Nationalist (Guomindang) capital in the War of Resistance Against Japan (1937-1945). Entrusted with the task of communicating the U.S. view of the world war, Fisher's office and those in several other Chinese cities built a sizable infrastructure for news distribution, radio broadcasts, film projection, and educational programming by war's end.¹ Known in Mandarin as the *meiguo xinwenchu*, these offices comprised a local front for a shapeshifting array of Washington bureaucracies. Between 1941 and 1953, they answered to the COI, the Office of War Information (OWI), and the State Department's Office of International Information and Cultural Affairs (OIICA) before it was absorbed into the U.S. Information Agency (USIA).² The victory of the Chinese Communist Party in the Chinese civil war (1945-1949) and the subsequent U.S.-China conflict in the Korean war (1950-1953) pushed the USIS's China-branches to British-controlled Hong Kong and Guomindang-controlled Taiwan, occasioning further displacements of institutional continuity.

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To speak of a "USIS China archive" across these historical and institutional ruptures is to engage in a process of reconstruction that cannot take for granted the given *arché* of state archives and the organizational structures they reflect. Instead, we might envision the USIS/*meiguo xinwenchu* as a translingual signifier that connects a dispersed web of documents, institutional actors, and practices. On the one hand, the records of the COI, the OWI, the State Department, and USIA (housed at the National Archives and Records Administration) remain indispensable for mapping lines of institutional continuity

and discontinuity. Yet, a different picture emerges when we look for the *meiguo xinwenchu* in Chinese-language sources, which show how the USIS became part of local networks of print circulation, radio broadcast, educational reform, cultural exchange, and film distribution.

I first encountered traces of the USIS China archive while conducting research for my dissertation (and now book project) on Chinese educational film practices in the 1930s and 1940s.³ During this period, the Guomindang state, supported by international organizations, built a sizable infrastructure for the import, production, distribution, and exhibition of 16mm films for the purposes of mass education. Part of the book examines how this nation-building project became entangled in

Great Power agendas via systems of technology transfer and institutional knowledge production. The USIS became a part of this landscape in 1942, when the Japanese invasion of Burma cut off the only land route into “Free China,” making airlift over the Himalayas (known as “the Hump”) the only means of supplying Chiang Kai-shek’s government with supplies.⁴ The OWI and the State Department’s Cultural Relations program, working with the Army Signal Corps, arranged for projectors, films, filmstrips, and microfilmed periodicals to accompany tanks, guns, medicine, and reinforced steel over the Hump.⁵ Chinese educational film institutions, which had long been dependent on imports, turned to the USIS office in Chongqing as their source for projectors, sound equipment, and films, the latter which supplemented the meager supply of domestic titles produced by the University of Nanking (Jinling University) and the China Educational Film Studio.⁶ Such patterns of dependency continued into the postwar period, as the civil war and escalating inflation hindered plans to build a self-sufficient state-run film network and the USIS became an important film supplier as part of U.S. programs of cultural aid and educational exchange.

The bilingual film catalogs distributed by the USIS offer us a window into its work in curating and distributing U.S.-produced educational, military training, and propaganda motion pictures to Chinese film practitioners, and by extension, Chinese audiences. Film catalogs are important paratexts for film historians, serving as documents of how distributors pre-interpret films to facilitate their circulation to prospective users.⁷ I came across two USIS-film catalogs in the course of my research, one in the Chongqing municipal archives, where it was attached to a letter from the American Consulate,⁸ and the other in the Shanghai library’s Republican-era reading room, where it stood as a standalone publication [Figure 1].⁹

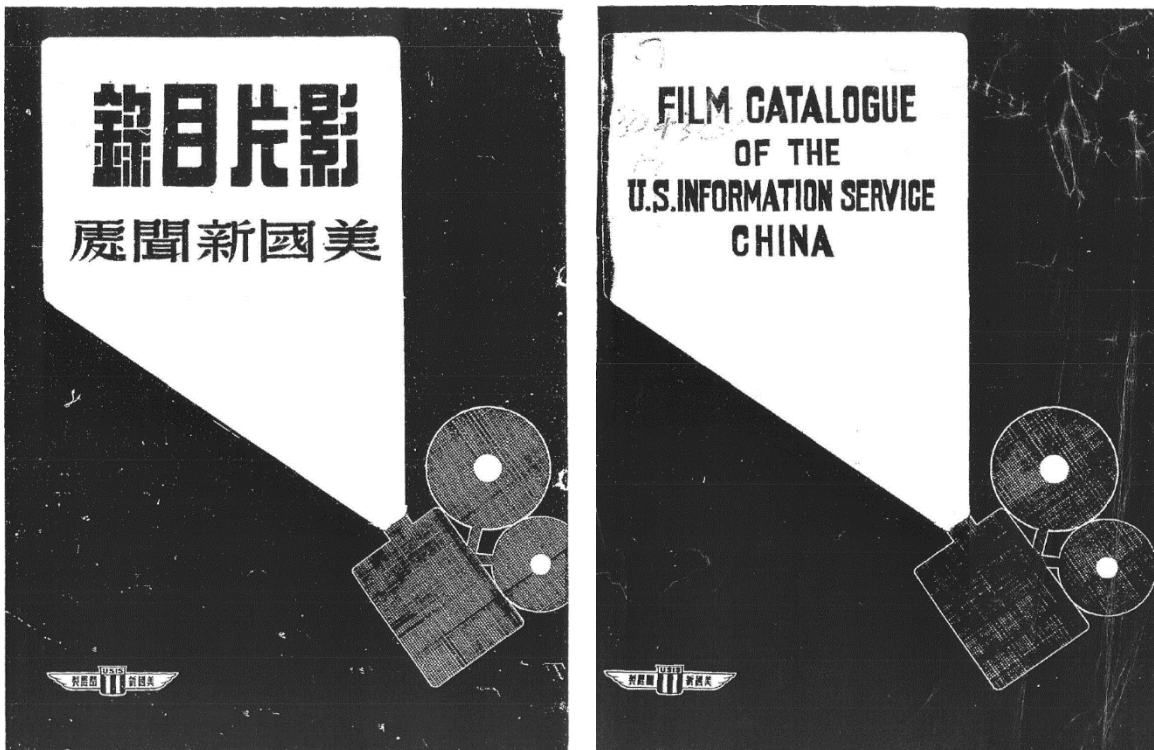


Figure 1: Front and Back Covers, "Film Catalogue of the U.S. Information Service China"
[circa 1947 (Publication data unavailable)]

Both catalogs are from after the war and list a variety of American nonfiction titles that could

be borrowed from USIS offices, including wartime OWI films such as *Why We Fight* (Frank Capra, 1944), U.S. Signal Corps training films, New Deal documentaries, and a repertoire of educational sound films by commercial producers such as Eastman, Erpi and Devry.¹⁰ However, the entries for the films in the catalogs do not contain information addressing their diverse production contexts, supplying only title, synopsis, format, language, and runtime, leading the uninformed reader to assume a unitary origin. The Shanghai catalog, the more extensive of the two, lists a total of one hundred and fifty-four films categorized into twenty-three subjects that include Aeronautics, Agriculture, Chemistry, History, Public Health, and United States Life [Figure 2]. The catalog's encyclopedic organization flattens what in reality was a far more chaotic assortment of wartime propaganda and training films, commercial educational fare, and sponsored government productions made for a variety of audiences into seemingly transparent categories, suggesting that motion pictures could be assimilated into existing configurations of knowledge. Such a view that film was a medium of information, as opposed to a distinctive dramatic art, was shared by Chinese educators, who placed motion pictures in a pantheon of technologies that could be used, as the educational cinematographer Sun Mingjing put it, to “introduce impressions, represent realities, transmit thoughts, and express sentiments.”¹¹

Through its presentation, the catalog fit into an epistemological framework shared between the USIS and Chinese film projectionists and educators, rendering it easily usable for the latter. The booklet also made ingenious use of the opposed reading orders English and Chinese in its bilingual formatting, such that the English text was printed on the front-facing pages (from the perspective of a reader of English), and the Chinese text proceeded on every “back” page. No reader would be forced to flip the book in a direction to which they would not have been accustomed. This sensitive act of cultural diplomacy reflected the makeup of the USIS staff, many of whom were China-born Americans and reputed China scholars who collaborated with their counterparts in Chinese institutions.¹² In this sense, the booklet emblemized an emerging modality of transpacific exchange premised, as Richard Jean So argues, on a “coeval, shared sense of temporal experience” made possible by high-speed networks of communication and transportation.¹³ As such, it also formed the terrain for new strategies of empire and national autonomy, based not on unilateral control of territory but collaboration and struggle over uneven networks of communication and logistics. It is indeed possible to understand the USIS presence in China as an expression of logistical and communicative power exercised by multiple agents across coeval networks. The film catalogs I discuss above existed primarily for the benefit of Chinese educational institutions, which ran mobile projection teams that brought USIS films to Chinese audiences, interpreting with their own aims in mind. In a 1943 *Public Opinion Quarterly* article, David Nelson Rowe, special assistant to the

APPENDIX 片名索引

TITLE	片名	CLASSIFICATION	类别	中文片名	Subth
A Bigger Tomorrow	更美好的明天	Propaganda	宣传	明天会更好	Page 10
A Date With West Virginia	西弗吉尼亚约会	Travel	旅行	西弗吉尼亚约会	Page 10
American Dental Association No. 1	美国牙科协会第一号	Dentistry	牙科	美国牙科协会第一号	Page 9
American Dental Association No. 2	美国牙科协会第二号	Dentistry	牙科	美国牙科协会第二号	Page 9
American Dental Association No. 3	美国牙科协会第三号	Dentistry	牙科	美国牙科协会第三号	Page 9
American Dental Association No. 4	美国牙科协会第四号	Dentistry	牙科	美国牙科协会第四号	Page 9
American Dental Association No. 5	美国牙科协会第五号	Dentistry	牙科	美国牙科协会第五号	Page 9
American Dental Association No. 6	美国牙科协会第六号	Dentistry	牙科	美国牙科协会第六号	Page 9
American Dental Association No. 7	美国牙科协会第七号	Dentistry	牙科	美国牙科协会第七号	Page 9
American Dental Association No. 8	美国牙科协会第八号	Dentistry	牙科	美国牙科协会第八号	Page 9
American Dental Association No. 9	美国牙科协会第九号	Dentistry	牙科	美国牙科协会第九号	Page 9
American Dental Association No. 10	美国牙科协会第十号	Dentistry	牙科	美国牙科协会第十号	Page 9
American Dental Association No. 11	美国牙科协会第十一号	Dentistry	牙科	美国牙科协会第十一号	Page 9
American Dental Association No. 12	美国牙科协会第十二号	Dentistry	牙科	美国牙科协会第十二号	Page 9
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American Dental Association No. 15	美国牙科协会第十五号	Dentistry	牙科	美国牙科协会第十五号	Page 9
American Dental Association No. 16	美国牙科协会第十六号	Dentistry	牙科	美国牙科协会第十六号	Page 9
American Dental Association No. 17	美国牙科协会第十七号	Dentistry	牙科	美国牙科协会第十七号	Page 9
American Dental Association No. 18	美国牙科协会第十八号	Dentistry	牙科	美国牙科协会第十八号	Page 9
American Dental Association No. 19	美国牙科协会第十九号	Dentistry	牙科	美国牙科协会第十九号	Page 9
American Dental Association No. 20	美国牙科协会第二十号	Dentistry	牙科	美国牙科协会第二十号	Page 9
American Dental Association No. 21	美国牙科协会第二十一号	Dentistry	牙科	美国牙科协会第二十一号	Page 9
American Dental Association No. 22	美国牙科协会第二十二号	Dentistry	牙科	美国牙科协会第二十二号	Page 9
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American Dental Association No. 100	美国牙科协会第一百号	Dentistry	牙科	美国牙科协会第一百号	Page 9

Figure 2: Appendix with titles and classifications
 ["Film Catalogue of the U.S. Information Service China," circa 1947 (Publication data unavailable)]

ambassador in Chongqing, complained about this situation, suggesting that the dissemination of news through organs controlled by foreign governments placed the U.S. in the “position of an advertising manager who has not yet decided what he is advertising.”¹⁴ Meanwhile, Chinese film practitioners noted their unease at the oversupply of U.S. films in their programs. In a 1943 report, for example, the student projectionist Wang Chaozhang reeled in horror at the thought that, after viewing US-supplied filmstrips, “the ordinary non-newspaper reading person only sees the allied forces at war, not even knowing how much blood our own country has spilled in search of victory.”¹⁵ Reacting to the screening of a U.S. Department of Agriculture film about soy, a postwar critic exclaimed in dismay that “we are educating our farmers with other people’s films, with the aid of Chinese film education workers!”¹⁶ Envisioning USIS in China as a dispersed *local* archive makes it possible to understand its institutionality as a product of both the agendas of its officers and those of its Chinese interlocutors working in a shared network. This approach moreover enables us to map how USIS participated in the local struggles that gave rise to the hegemony of “information” as the new keyword of the postwar order.

About the Author

Hongwei Thorn Chen is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication and Program in Asian Studies at Tulane University. He received his PhD in Cultural Studies and Comparative Literature at the University of Minnesota. Chen’s work examines how media shape rationalities of government, a subject he explores in his book manuscript, “Governing the Audio-visual: Educational Film in China, 1917–1952.” Chen’s writing has appeared in *Wide Screen* and *The Journal of Chinese Cinemas*. The research for this article has been generously funded by the Social Science Research Council Mellon-International Dissertation Research Fellowship.

¹ Matthew Johnson, “Propaganda and Sovereignty in Wartime China: Morale Operations and Psychological Warfare under the Office of War Information,” *Modern Asian Studies* 45, no. 2 (2011), 303–44.

² Historians of wartime China have opted to translate the FIS and OWI’s *meiguo xinwenchu* as “American Information Service” to avoid conflating WWII institutional structures with those of later periods, despite the fact that its Chinese nomenclature and institutional presence was consistent. See Johnson (op. cit) and Wang Ruiheng, “Taipingyang zhanzheng shiqi meiguo duihua xuanchuan: qiyuan, zhengzhi yu jigou” [American Propaganda in China during the Pacific War: Origins, Politics, and Institutions], *Shijie lishi* 4 (2014), 85–98. For an account of the USIS through its stateside institutional transformations, see Nicholas Cull, *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency: American Propaganda and Public Diplomacy, 1945–1989* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). Wilma Fairbank describes the State Department’s side of the story in Wilma Fairbank, *America’s Cultural Experiment in China, 1942–1949* (Washington: Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, U.S. Dept. of State, 1976).

³ Hongwei Thorn Chen, *Moving Pictures, Empty Words: : Cinema as Developmental Interface in the Chinese Reconstruction, 1932–1952* (Doctoral Dissertation: University of Minnesota, 2017). Also see Chen, “Cinemas, Highways, and the Making of Provincial Space: Mobile Screenings in Jiangsu, China, 1933–1937,” *Wide Screen* 7, no. 1 (2018), online.

⁴ William Tunner, *Over the Hump* (New York: Booton Hendron, 1964).

⁵ Fairbank, 146–9.

⁶ For a summary of Chinese educational film production, see Peng Jiaoxue, *Minguo shiqi jiaoyu dianying fazhan jianzhi* [The history of the development of educational film in Republican China] (Beijing: Zhongguo chuanmei daxue chubanshe, 2008).

⁷ For a discussion of film catalogs as paratexts, see the chapters in Part V of Frank Kessler and Nanna Verhoeff eds., *Networks of Entertainment: Early Film Distribution 1895-1915* (New Barnet: John Libbey Publishing Ltd, 2007).

⁸ U.S. Information Service American Consulate Letter, April 15, 1946. Chongqing Municipal Archive no. 0086001002470000039.

⁹ *Film Catalogue of the U.S. Information Service China* (no further publication data available).

¹⁰ The Shanghai catalog does not have a publication date, but its list of film borrowing locations in Shanghai, Guangdong, Chongqing, Hankou, Changchun, Nanjing, Beijing (Beijing), Taipei, and Urumqi suggest that it was published after the U.S. had set up consulates and USIS offices in cities formerly under Japanese occupation (likely in 1947 or 1948).

¹¹ Sun Mingjing, “Zhongguo wenhua dageming zhong de yi ge xiao shiyan” [A Small Experiment in the Great Chinese Cultural Revolution] *Yingyin* 7, no. 8 (1948), 91.

¹² According to John K. Fairbank, at the peak of the war there were 125 Americans and 706 Chinese working for USIS-China. See John K. Fairbank, *Chinabound: A Fifty-Year Memoir* (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), 300. Fairbank, a Harvard historian who would later be pivotal to the development of Area Studies in the U.S. academe, was the Director of the USIS China branch between July 1945 and October 1946.

¹³ Richard Jean So, *Transpacific Community: America, China, and the Rise and Fall of a Cultural Network* (Columbia University Press, 2016), 14.

¹⁴ David Nelson Rowe, “OWI’s Far Eastern Outposts: Some Proposals,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 7, no. 1 (1943), 90-99.

¹⁵ Wang Chaozhang, “Puji dianhua jiaoyu shixi gongzuo baogao” [Disseminating electrified education: report on internship work], *Dianying yu boyin* 4, no. 2 (1945), 28.

¹⁶ Huang Bawo, “Dianying jiaoyu de bei ai” [A lament on Cinematographic Education], *Nanjing xinmin bao*, February 23, 1947, reprinted in *Dianying yu boyin* 10, no. 5 (1947), 255.

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