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Engendered Perceptions

Reconsidering Wartime Female Tewu (Special Agent) Activities and Narratives of “Honey Traps” in the Early People’s Republic of China, 1949–1959

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Abstract

This article considers how Chinese Communist Party (CCP) officials understood, perceived, and experienced enemy female *tewu* (special agent) activities and “honey traps” during the early People’s Republic of China. Drawing upon internally circulated party reports and newsletters, speeches of officials, newspapers, films, literature, and dramas, it finds that officials saw enemy female *tewu* as real threats that had tangible impact on both civilians and men affiliated with the party through honey traps and gendered manipulations. It further argues that narratives of female *tewu* in official instructions, newspaper reports, and popular cultural works played a larger role in the CCP’s broader efforts to combat and resist enemy espionage than previously understood. This article contextualises existing arguments about CCP counterespionage propaganda. It counterbalances perspectives that suggest the utilisation of these narratives was largely based on irrational wartime sentiments, with the primary aim of increasing the party’s societal control.

Keywords

special agents – female spies – Chinese Communist Party – honey traps – espionage – sabotage – early People’s Republic of China

1 Introduction

In March 1950, Mao Zedong and other high-ranking Chinese Communist Party (hereafter CCP) leaders stopped by Shenyang on the way back from their visit to the Soviet Union. They watched *The Honey Trap* (美人計), a new Peking Opera programme offered at the Shenyang Peking Opera house.¹ Similar to an older programme of the same name that features renowned fictional beauty Diaochan from the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, this remake also featured a female lead who strategically mobilises her femininity to manipulate an unsuspecting yet powerful man. Set in the Song dynasty, the opera tells the story of a peasant revolt leader, Wang Xiaopo, and his troops settling in Chengdu. To sabotage Wang's rule, the treacherous local tyrant Cao Gonghan sends his younger sister Cao Xifeng to seduce one of Wang's men, Li Jianzhi. Li falls into Cao Xifeng's "honey trap" and becomes corrupt. The virtuous leader Wang, however, exposes Cao Gonghan and Cao Xifeng's treachery, and punishes Li for his corruption.² After thoroughly enjoying *The Honey Trap*, Mao gave it his approval, and printed versions of the opera script and public performances became available later that year and throughout the 1950s.³

The Honey Trap's core message about the perils of enemy sabotage carried out by treacherous women captures some of the key concerns held by the CCP about "enemy" espionage and "honey traps" during the early People's Republic. Similar to the eponymous opera, a honey trap specifically refers to a technique in espionage employed to manipulate a target via an exploitation of the target's romantic interest in order to solicit intelligence or to entice them to engage in actions that they would otherwise not have done. To educate and alert the masses about these threats, the CCP actively worked with cultural agents such as film producers, directors, and writers,⁴ using film and literature to portray "seductress-spies"⁵ akin to the Cao Xifeng character, and featured accounts of real enemy women spies who engaged in honey-trap activities in newspapers.⁶ Louise Edwards thoughtfully characterises the production and utilisation of these kinds of narratives as patriarchal and propagandist.⁷ Xiaoning Lu and Ying Du further argue that these narratives are "framed by Cold War geopolitics in general and by the CCP's two political campaigns against

1 Li 1993, 36–37.

2 Xu 1953.

3 Li 1993, 36–37; Xu 1953.

4 Du 2017, 162.

5 I borrow this term from Tammy Proctor: Proctor 2003, 131.

6 Lu 2020, 16–34.

7 Edwards 2016.

counterrevolutionaries in the 1950s⁸ and grounded in “exigencies of war and related anxieties.”⁹ These viewpoints are accurate, but when read alone, they endorse a perspective that suggests these representations of spies were merely by-products of spy-paranoia driven by irrational wartime sentiments. I argue that in addition to the CCP’s official counterespionage programmes and domestic security endeavours, gendered narratives which consisted of official instructions, newspaper reports, and popular cultural works were a vital part of the CCP’s broader efforts to resist and fight enemy espionage.¹⁰ These narratives served a purpose that was just as important as official counterespionage programs by fostering vigilance and resilience against seemingly innocuous dangers like honey traps targeted at male CCP officials.

Instead of simply rejecting the CCP’s arguments as “clearly illogical,” the article uses Aminda Smith’s approach of “taking seriously the leftist logic that shaped discourses and experiences.”¹¹ In doing so, this article sheds fresh light on how understandings of enemy special agent (*tewu* 特務) activity and these women’s perceived effect on men were key premises of the CCP’s decision to promote and utilise narratives about the female *tewu*. As John Delury shows, CCP “anxieties” about counterrevolutionaries and enemy espionage were based on real threats.¹² Indeed, because a large majority of CCP party members were almost certainly heterosexual males, the CCP believed that there was a real threat of external enemy female *tewu* who, like some of their representations in popular narratives, would manipulate normative feminine attributes and gender norms to manipulate male CCP officials into doing things detrimental to the party.¹³ In this context, normative femininity is understood to be closely linked to female *tewu*’s outer appearance – as is apparent from “*meirenji*” 美人計, the Chinese term for honey trap, which literally means the “strategy of beauties,” where age, or the appearance of one’s (young) age, was actively

8 Lu 2020, 19.

9 Du 2017, 162.

10 On Public Security endeavours to catch enemy agents, see, for example, Delury 2022, 197–98.

11 Smith 2021, 659.

12 Delury 2022, 15.

13 You and Yao, 2020. Likewise, an estimation regarding the number of female officials before the Communist takeover suggests that the majority of party officials were male, see *Jiefang qian Shanghai dixiadang douzheng qingkuang*. While there is no doubt that homosexuality existed, a majority of these men were likely heterosexual, or at least appeared to be so in public and on official record. This is because homosexuality was taboo within and beyond the party, and men were denounced when caught engaging in homosexual sexual practices: Worth et al. 2018, 38–57. Michael Schoenhals has also written about how CCP men have been susceptible to enemy women’s advances: Schoenhals 2013, 101–9.

used by women to increase personal appeal. Moreover, this threat was no new phenomenon in the Mao Era. In the 1940s, for example, the Communists noted on multiple occasions that enemy female *tewu* were using “female sex appeal” (女色相) to engage in espionage.¹⁴ Thus, reports of enemy female *tewu* activities in the 1950s and onwards were seen as a part of a persistent and systematic endeavour by the enemy to sabotage and undermine CCP rule.

Both the sustained enemy *tewu* endeavours and the production of works such as *The Honey Trap* in the 1950s encapsulate a continuation of the party, state, and society’s concerns and interests in gendered espionage throughout the twentieth century. In the Republican period, spy culture flourished against a backdrop of the growing hostilities between the Japanese and the Chinese, and ongoing conflicts between the Nationalists and the Communists. Captivating stories about espionage and female spies comparable to *The Honey Trap* greatly appealed to the Chinese public, and there was a rapidly growing mass market for publications on modern intelligence warfare.¹⁵ In addition to popular culture, news about female spies or writings about famous women like Mata Hari or Yoshiko Kawashima, who were reputed to be spies, were regularly featured in newspapers, tabloids, and magazines.¹⁶ As Louise Edwards shows, prior to 1949, a diverse range of outlets, from *Linglong* 玲瓏 magazine to the Communist publication *China’s Women* (中國婦女), featured examples of “seductress-spies” as an inspiring, although sometimes restricted, model for women’s involvement in war efforts.¹⁷ Furthermore, the Communists frequently utilised cautionary tales featuring the “seductress-spy” to convey counterespionage messages to both the general public and their own officials before and after 1949.

The use of gendered espionage narratives and propaganda before and after 1949 by the CCP should also be considered in light of the party’s own deployment of female agents, as well as their denial and condemnation of using honey trap tactics. In CCP political discourse, sex related to their agents was taboo due to the party’s emphasis on the moral purity of its members and leadership throughout the twentieth century. Louise Edwards convincingly demonstrates how doubts over a female agent’s sexual fidelity, such as the case regarding underground operative Guan Lu 關露, resulted in her marginalisation by the party as well as in commemorative narratives – both before and

14 “Guomindang paiqian tewu qianru wo qu,” *RMRB*, May 23, 1946, 2. See also “Wo buhuo de nü tewu,” *Jiefang ribao*, April 8, 1944, 2, and “Gaodu jingti tewu huodong Guang Ding Shou junyou chahuo,” *Ji Jin ribao*, July 15, 1947, 2.

15 Zhang 2020.

16 Edwards 2016, 93; Zhang 2020.

17 Edwards 2016, 105.

after 1949.¹⁸ During the 1950s, even popular cultural works that featured virtuous fictional female spy characters who used honey trap tactics for patriotic reasons were criticised and censored, and authors who created these characters were condemned.¹⁹ After 1949, the CCP banned the use of honey traps in their public security endeavours, at least on paper.²⁰ However, Michael Schoenhals aptly suggests that during the earlier years of the 1950s, at least, it would likely have been easy for the party to find women prepared to act as “bait” had it wished to do so.²¹

As this article deals with narratives about espionage in the post-1949 period wherein enemy agents are often labelled as *tewu*, a brief discussion on the definition of *tewu* and its translations is necessary. In October 1949, an editor of the CCP's *Internal Party Bulletin* (黨內通訊) defined this term. Citing the 1948 booklet *What Must Be Known Regarding Urban Security Work* (城市保衛工作須知), edited and published by the Social Affairs Department (社會部), a CCP organ that dealt with intelligence and counterintelligence, the editor stated that a *tewu* is someone affiliated to an enemy military or political institution who engages in sabotage and/or intelligence activities, and who may or may not adopt the title of *tewu*.²² Scholars have discussed elsewhere the problem of intercultural translation and the importance of considering local and historical contexts when understanding and translating Chinese terms – such as *jiandie* 間諜 and *tewu* – into “spy” or “agent” respectively, even more so when referring to female spies.²³ These considerations also apply here. In particular, *tewu*, translated here and in other works as “special agent,” sometimes “special operative,”²⁴ or more generally as “spy,”²⁵ is an exceedingly challenging term and “does not have a good equivalent in the English language.”²⁶ Despite its official definition, the term is in practice often used by the general public and even sometimes by CCP sources as “a term of abuse thrown indiscriminately

18 Edwards 2020, 220–23.

19 In 1952, for example, writer and professor Chen Quan 陈铨, who wrote various best-selling spy stories during the Republican period, had to “reflect” and confess upon his many “wrong deeds,” including his decision to feature good seductress-spies, and apparently using these fictional women's sexuality to spread pornographic and counterrevolutionary messages. See Chen 1952.

20 Schoenhals 2013, 103.

21 Schoenhals 2013, 108–9.

22 “Shenme ren shi ‘tewu fenzi’ yu ‘fan’geming fenzi?” *Dangnei tongxun*, no. 35 (Oct. 30, 1945), 27.

23 Shih 2020, 115–26; Zhang 2020, 840–51.

24 Wakeman 2003; Du 2017.

25 Wemheuer 2019; Hooper 2016; Mattis and Brazil 2019.

26 Schoenhals 2013, 2.

at just about anyone suspected of maintaining links with perceived external enemies of the PRC,” in Michael Schoenhals’ words.²⁷ In addition to the official definition, practical uncertainties, and elements of arbitrariness that inherently come with the term *tewu*, female (*nü*) *tewu* in the popular context, and even in some official contexts during the early PRC, often refers to a woman who is a seductress-spy.

The argument of this article will be advanced via three sections. In the first section, which examines popular narratives of honey traps and female *tewu*, I show that this was understood as a woman who uses sex and/or mobilises normative femininity to achieve “counter-revolutionary aims,” which are directly or indirectly related to intelligence-gathering or other clandestine activities such as sabotage and sedition.²⁸ The second section will investigate internal party sources, such as speeches and reports by Public Security Bureau officials, that illustrate the CCP’s acute awareness of what was seen as rampant enemy female *tewu* activity within its territories that impacted not only civilians but also individual male officials, the party, and domestic security at large. Weaving together the arguments presented in this article, the last section will discuss why and how the party sought to combat this threat using newspapers and the arena of arts and culture, in addition to mass political campaigns and counterespionage endeavours.

2 The Female *Tewu* in the Public Eye

In 1953, national CCP mouthpiece *People’s Daily* (人民日報) published an article that featured an account of the success of civilian Chen Lihua 陳麗華 in pursuing and reporting on her neighbours to the Public Security Bureau, who confirmed that the man and his mistress were indeed Nationalist *tewu*. According to this account, Chen first sensed that something suspicious was going on when her neighbour, who had left for Hong Kong right before the 1949 takeover, abruptly returned to Xiamen in 1953 with a strange woman. Moreover, the man, who was already married, slept in the same room as this

27 Schoenhals 2013, 2. Brian DeMare argues that this is because “during the revolution, words are weaponized,” and that often it was the “labels and not the reality that mattered.” See DeMare 2022, 185, 267.

28 One notable exception is a *People’s Daily* article published in April 1951 about mass public trials of counter-revolutionaries in Chongqing, which labelled a woman named Xue Zhiyou 薛智有 as a female *tewu*. The article describes Xue as a member of a religious sect that was deemed counterrevolutionary; see “Qiwán rén jùxíng dàhuì gōngshēn tewu,” *RMRB*, April 18, 1951, 1.

woman. Chen observed that while this suspicious couple did not have proper day jobs, they still lived a lavish life as they were sent cash every month from an unknown source. The Public Security Bureau later revealed that the treacherous couple met in Hong Kong where the woman became the man's mistress. In Xiamen the couple collected military, political, and economic intelligence about the PRC for an enemy intelligence agency in Hong Kong. Together they also developed a counterrevolutionary organisation in Xiamen. The article's conclusion stated that the couple was apprehended by Public Security officials and subsequently punished, conveying a clear message to readers that such treacherous activities would not be tolerated. In addition, the article emphasises citizens' vigilance, reflecting the party-state's aspiration for mass participation in counterespionage efforts.²⁹

Throughout the 1950s and onwards, there was no small number of public narratives that sought to illustrate the perils of both enemy male and female *tewu*, as well as the praiseworthy actions of righteous, adroit civilians who "did the right thing" by reporting them to the Public Security Bureau. Chen Lihua's story published in *People's Daily* belongs to this genre of narratives that appeared via newspapers, periodicals, published booklets, films, and theatre, which collectively demonstrate how female *tewu* were understood by their creators, and possibly by consumers of these narratives, which included both civilians and party officials. These texts reveal that the term female *tewu* often deals with a particular set of gendered associations and attributes. Thus the prefix *nü* 女 (female) in this case is not merely a simple denotation of the *tewu*'s biological sex. Many of the female *tewu* represented in these works are women who approach and seduce unsuspecting, innocent men and/or those who are already corrupt and treacherous.

Specifically, the female *tewu* is often presented as someone who sets honey traps by skilfully mobilising normative femininity and gender norms to their advantage.³⁰ The purpose of these honey traps is to gather crucial intelligence about the CCP and PRC, giving it to external enemies and committing forms of sabotage. The 1957 film *The Eve of a Fierce Battle* (激戰前夜), produced by the August First Film Studio, illustrates the stereotypical characteristics of a female *tewu*. A main antagonist of the film is Lin Meifang who is presented as a beautiful primary school teacher and the girlfriend of a weak-willed, unsuspecting People's Liberation Army (hereafter PLA) officer. In the film she attempts to ferret out intelligence by, in the words of a film critic, "selling out her youth"

29 "Xiamen shi jiating funü Chen Lihua jianju tewu," *RMRB*, November 18, 1954, 3.

30 I have argued elsewhere that female CCP underground operatives utilised similar tactics in their work: Zhang, 2023.

(出賣自己的青春) and seducing her lover, then remaining romantically linked to him in order to make more use of him later.³¹ Lin's actions are soon detected, and she is ultimately arrested. Here, it is clear that the character Lin actively utilises her youth and beauty – commonly perceived to be desirable attributes for women – as assets in order to achieve her goal of gathering intelligence about PLA military activities.³²

The way a female *tewu* dresses and maintains her appearance is portrayed as an important part of how these women try to attract men and set honey traps. Included in a collection of short stories published in 1955 Shanghai is the account of an alert woman named Sun Huiru who reported to the authorities her treacherous *tewu* neighbours, a good-for-nothing married man, Chen Mingzhao, and his beautiful, “devilishly flirtatious” (*yaorao* 妖嬈) “cousin” Chen Shufang.³³ Sun Huiru becomes increasingly suspicious when she overhears Chen Mingzhao speak poorly of the CCP and notices that Chen Shufang alternates between dressing seductively (likely referring to more form-fitting dresses that enhance one's figure and feminine appeal) and dressing like a party official (likely referring to more gender-neutral uniform outfits). To investigate, Sun deliberately builds a good relationship with Chen Mingzhao's “dumb” but hardworking wife, eventually finding out that Chen Shufang is in fact a “fox spirit” (*huli jing* 狐狸精)³⁴ and “whore” (*biaozi* 婊子), who not only seduced Chen Mingzhao and became his mistress, but maintains liaisons with many other men regularly, too.³⁵ This suggests to the reader that Chen Shufang was probably seducing different men for her treacherous deeds. Sun eventually reports both Chen Zhaoming and Chen Shufang to the Public Security Bureau as she believes that bringing *tewu* to justice is important.³⁶

Some texts detail how the female *tewu* tries to interact with men and the methods she employs to manipulate them. A 1950 short story, *The Capture of a Female Spy* (女特務落網記), published in an anthology, describes two PLA soldiers' encounter with a female *tewu* – a young woman in her mid-twenties who was transporting intelligence for the enemy. She is described as having permed hair, which suggests to the reader that she is conscious of fashion trends and pays attention to her outer appearance. When stopped and questioned by the

31 “Cong yinmu shang kan renmin zhanshi de chengzhang,” *RMRB*, August 3, 1957, 7.

32 “Cong yinmu shang kan renmin zhanshi de chengzhang,” *RMRB*, August 3, 1957, 7.

33 Wang 1955, 34–43.

34 “Fox Spirit” is a derogatory expression used to label and characterise women who are perceived as promiscuous and having loose morals. It suggests or is used to describe women who actively pursue unavailable and/or married men. See Stevens 2013, 163.

35 Wang 1955, 40.

36 Wang 1955, 43.

two soldiers, she speaks in a “delicately feminine tone” (嬌聲嬌氣), once again suggesting that she is trying to mobilise the then-dominant gender stereotype of women being vulnerable and thus unlikely to engage in dangerous political activity.³⁷ The text also details how this woman praises the soldiers for their hard work, implying she is flattering the men to lower their guard. Yet the officers become suspicious anyway, and after a thorough search discover that she hid intelligence in her hair.³⁸ From this story we learn that female *tewu* frequently manipulate their femininity and mobilise dominant norms and stereotypes to their advantage to avoid being suspected.

Besides Chinese productions of popular narratives about female *tewu*, cultural works that were translated into Chinese were imported from the Soviet Union and other countries within the Soviet orbit. A number of these films dealing with the topic of espionage have formulaic plots with seductress-spy characters comparable to Chinese counterespionage films. They too feature treacherous female spies, translated and known to Chinese audiences as female *tewu*, who set honey traps and mobilise normative femininity to their advantage. For example, the 1944 Soviet film *Duel* (Поединок, shown in the PRC in 1951 as *The Tale of Eliminating Traitors*, 鋤奸記), featured several treacherous female *tewu*.³⁹ One is a young singer named Natalya Osenina who targets men and flirts with them, actively mobilising her beauty while working for Nazi Germany.⁴⁰ There is also a scene in the film where German intelligence officials discuss the deployment of *tewu* into the Soviet Union, and when referring to one potential female operative named Irina, an official describes her as having a “decent outer appearance” (外表還可以),⁴¹ and explicitly praises her for being “intimately familiar with seducing people” (很懂得勾引人). This suggests to the audience that seduction is a key skill for women involved in secret warfare, and was likely understood as such in the 1950s.⁴²

One contemporary reading of this film is apparent from the response of a *People's Daily* film critic, who argued that *Duel* with its engaging storyline and female *tewu* characters was particularly educational to the people of China. This is because it sheds light on how the enemy would use different ways to sabotage the people's revolution, something that the Chinese were particularly familiar with since there were many enemy spies doing the same in China.⁴³

37 Fujian renmin chubanshe bianjibu 1955, 20.

38 Fujian renmin chubanshe bianjibu 1955, 20–22.

39 “Buneng sihao songxie dui fan'geming fenzi de douzheng,” *RMRB*, May 22, 1952, 3.

40 *Duel*, at 23:38.

41 *Duel*, at 32:20.

42 *Duel*, at 32:21–32:22.

43 “Buneng sihao songxie dui fan'geming fenzi de douzheng,” *RMRB*, May 22, 1952, 3.

No doubt there were other possible interpretations and responses than what was published in *People's Daily*. But, as we shall see, this assumption that there were real men and women engaging in secret warfare against the CCP and the PRC stemmed from on-the-ground realities and was shared among officials within the party.

3 Party Interpretations and Experiences of Female *tewu* Activities and Honey Traps

How did party officials perceive, interpret, and experience female *tewu*? It is reasonable to assume that at least some party members and officials read, saw, and even internalised representations of female *tewu* from sources such as *People's Daily* as well as from popular culture such as films and literature. During the early PRC, some party officials assumed that members of their own party were aware of such popular representations. Wang Wenqi 王文琪, a party member who worked for the Communist Youth League's China Youth Press, for example, was expelled from the party in 1955; the official decision stated that this was because Wang was "consistently engaging in chaotic sexual relations" (一再亂搞男女關係) with a woman who was almost certainly a female *tewu*. He continued to be involved with her, even after she referred to herself on multiple occasions as "No. 13," the codename of a treacherous female *tewu* character from a Soviet film.⁴⁴ Here officials from the party committee of the CCP's China Youth Press impute intention of wrongdoing to Wang by implicitly arguing that Wang must have, or at a bare minimum should have, reasonably suspected that he was dealing with an enemy *tewu*, since he must (or should) have been aware of this cultural reference. Regardless of whether Wang was aware or not, this example also reveals that members of the party committee or the officials who investigated Wang's case understood the reference to No. 13.

In addition to popular sources, internally circulated official sources – those intended for a mostly internal party audience, such as reports and speeches given by senior officials from the Public Security Bureau – better reflect how the members or officials of the party might have perceived, interpreted, and experienced female *tewu*, since these sources were explicitly composed by and for officials. There were overlaps between the attributes of female *tewu* presented in popular narratives and real enemy women described in these internal sources. Like their popular counterparts, those described as enemy female *tewu* in these internal sources were understood to be women who mobilised

44 Zhonggong Zhongguo qingnian chubanshe zongzhi 1955.

normative femininity and gender norms in order to achieve their treacherous aims. These women were considered dangerous, as their mobilisation of normative femininity and the use of their own sexuality allowed them to weaponise a set of skills and techniques exclusive to feminine women against heterosexual men, who represented the majority of CCP members and officials at that time. While there were incidences where female party officials were seduced by what was described as treacherous enemy men, a predominant number of honey trap cases reported in these internal official sources refer to ones conducted by women against men.⁴⁵

Existing scholarship has illustrated how contentious the political situation was for the Communists who took over China after 1949. Not only were there internal party power struggles and domestic unrest, but there were also external military threats amidst the rapid unfolding of the geopolitical conflicts now described as the global Cold War.⁴⁶ Adding to the array of problems faced by the Communists were instances where party officials leaked confidential information, both intentionally and occasionally unintentionally through private communications or personal romantic relationships. Some of these leaks occurred in informal locations such as teahouses and taverns that made it difficult for the party to supervise and detect.⁴⁷ This was connected to the broader and more urgent concern that both enemy men and women were engaging or conspiring to engage in secret warfare against the CCP by ferreting information out of targeted party officials and initiating other seditious activities from spreading rumours to inciting unrest.⁴⁸

While enemy female *tewu* activity was relatively infrequent compared to male *tewu* activity, party officials made clear that the occurrence of these women was by no means “accidental” (*ouran* 偶然).⁴⁹ In addition to their potential to cause damage, these women should be taken seriously because they were an example of how “class enemies” were using “all kinds of despicable

45 Quanguo fulian dangzu 1955.

46 Vogel 1969; Chen 2001; Gao 2004; DeMare 2022; Delury 2022.

47 Zong Zhengzhibu 1956.

48 In 1951, Yu Jiangzhen 于江震, a high-ranking CCP official and committee member of the CCP Southwest Bureau, reported that there were “counterrevolutionaries,” including women, who were forming secret organisations that threatened the security of the party and the safety of individual CCP officials, such as the “Group of Anti-Communists for the Protection of People” (*Fangong baomintuan* 反共保民團), and the “Women’s Spy Group” (*funüjiandiedui* 婦女間諜隊). See Yu Jiangzhen 1951. This was stated as a top concern in the report delivered during the Second National Public Security Meeting in October 1950 by then Minister of Public Security Luo Ruiqing 羅瑞卿: Luo 1950.

49 Quanguo fulian dangzu 1955.

and sinister ways to corrupt our officials.”⁵⁰ Specifically, quoting the investigation of three Public Security Branch Bureaus in Nanjing, in 1955 the Party Group of the All-China Democratic Women’s Foundation (中華全國民主婦女聯合會, hereafter ACDWF) delivered to the CCP Central Committee a report regarding the corruption and degeneracy of certain party officials; this report asserted that there was compelling evidence to show counterrevolutionaries were systematically using the relationship between the two sexes in order to engage in sabotage, where the main targets were military personnel, bureaucrats, and factory officials.⁵¹ The threat of female *tewu* was therefore understood to be an important part of a much larger, organised and systematic endeavour by external enemies to undermine CCP rule.

To officials, however, there was a distinction between how male and female *tewu* operated. While male *tewu* were mainly those who were relaying and secretly obtaining intelligence, female *tewu* were those who manipulated unsuspecting men to carry out seditious acts on their behalf. This distinction underlies descriptions of female *tewu* activity in internal party sources, such as a report made in April 1951 by Bu Shengguang 卜盛光, then minister of Public Security of the South-Central China Military and Political Committee, in which he described activities by enemy men and women:

In Wuhan alone, it has been found that during the latter half of March, there were 11 cases of arson committed by (male) *tewu* within 10 days. They are increasingly finding more ways to conspire (against the CCP and the PRC), such as ... (the use of) female *tewu* who are dressing up as students ... and setting fire to hotel rooms ... In other locations (there are) conspiracies such as the use of beautiful women to seduce (officials), and (the use of) supplies to entice and corrupt officials⁵²

Here, men are described as committing arson, while women are described as committing not only arson but also setting honey traps. This shows that Bu and other officials were aware that the female *tewu* had the capacity to do as much if not more harm than her male counterparts. Not only could she gather intelligence and engage in sabotage, but she could also by nature of her sex access various strategies and techniques that were only available to women in order to achieve these ends.

50 Quanguo fulian dangzu 1955.

51 Quanguo fulian dangzu 1955.

52 Bu Shengguang 1951. For references to honey traps, see also: Wei Siwen 1951; Huanan fenju 1951; *Zhonggong Zhongyang Xinanju* 1951.

Officials were eminently aware that enemy men and organisations would make use of these gendered techniques by mobilising and unleashing women on CCP male officials.⁵³ A commentary on *The Party's Supervision Work* (黨的檢查工作) published in 1956 describes how a “tyrannical landlord” (惡霸地主), who had been in contact with a *tewu* working for the United States, sent two of his daughters to infiltrate the party by marrying high-ranking party officials who were “at a minimum, secretaries of the county Party Committees”:

Of course, they (the daughters) “lived up to their mission,” and achieved their expected goals in no time. From then on, this tyrannical landlord transformed into a “family member of a revolutionary cadre,” (able to) escape (from his crimes) scot-free. Moreover (the tyrannical landlord) often reads documents secretly hand-copied by his daughters. Incidents like this, or (even) incidents that have much more dire consequences (for the party) are no longer news within the party.⁵⁴

These enemy endeavours were understood to be highly effective against CCP men, as it was reported that some of these “fallen” male officials would use “free love” and the freedom to marry and divorce as excuses to engage in or continue illicit relationships with female *tewu*.⁵⁵ Internal sources indirectly reveal how deep an official's emotional attachment to a female *tewu* could potentially be. A 1951 report, for example, described the extent to which one male official in Guizhou was infatuated with a female *tewu*. This official continued to send her blankets so she could stay warm in prison, despite knowing that she had been convicted as a *tewu*. Even after the female *tewu* was executed, he bought her a coffin, paid to have her body properly buried, and personally burnt joss paper at her grave.⁵⁶

Thus, for CCP officials, the ability of female *tewu* to use and mobilise normative femininity and gender attributes to attract men differentiated them from male *tewu*. For example, the 1955 ACDWF report stated that one convicted female *tewu*, Wang Yali 王雅麗, confessed that she and her cohort of female *tewu* aimed to “use (one's) beautiful youth to work for and be loyal to Free China” (以美麗的青春去效忠自由中國).⁵⁷ Equally, romance, “love” (愛情),

53 Quanguo fulian dangzu 1955.

54 *Yan'ge jiandu he zhizhi dangyuan geren shenghuo ...*

55 *Yan'ge jiandu he zhizhi dangyuan geren shenghuo ...*

56 Yu Jiangzhen 1951.

57 Quanguo fulian dangzu, 1955.

and sexual intercourse were also understood to play a crucial part in interactions and relationships between CCP men and female *tewu*.⁵⁸

Officials interpreted some of these examples of “fallen men” as testament to how female *tewu*, using the relationship curated with these men, manipulated and fundamentally corrupted originally upright men into apparently irrational behaviours that they otherwise would not have engaged in. An irrational action in this case would likely entail choosing to do something that severely risked damage to one’s own wellbeing and interests. The 1955 ACDWF report describes how Bian Banshan 邊伴山, the former vice president of the Tianjin Municipal High Court, went against the wishes of the party – here presumably referring to his superiors and colleagues – and insisted on marrying a female *tewu*.⁵⁹ Similarly, for Wang Wenqi of the China Youth Press, the 1955 decision described how Wang betrayed the party’s interest, despite knowing he would be severely punished for it, because he was in love with No. 13:

Wang Wenqi also knew that this kind of behaviour is not tolerated by the party’s disciplinary committee. He told (No. 13) at that time, “(I am) committing a political mistake. I might fall over because of this, and never be able to get back up. But I am falling precisely because of you.”⁶⁰

In other words, Wang professed to choosing to commit the grave mistake of leaking classified party materials and abusing his position because of No. 13, actions he would not have taken if not for her. Likewise, then Minister of Public Security Luo Ruiqing 羅瑞卿 in his 1950 report describes the tragic incident of how a female *tewu* ordered one of the victims of her seduction to kill high-ranking CCP official Zeng Shan 曾山. The male official became very conflicted, and while he did not want to assassinate Zeng, who was his superior, neither did he dare to report her, instead choosing to commit suicide.⁶¹ In these three cases, the men involved intentionally chose to sacrifice or risk not only the party’s interest, but their career and political advancement opportunities, status, and in extreme cases their life, partly if not wholly because of the female *tewu*.

The “reasoning” (道理) behind the official interpretation that linked one’s personal, romantic affairs with one’s work and commitment to the party is the assumption that if a revolutionary’s personal life is increasingly corrupt

58 Quanguo fulian dangzu, 1955.

59 Quanguo fulian dangzu, 1955.

60 Zhonggong Zhongguo qingnian chubanshe zongzhi 1955.

61 Luo Ruiqing 1950.

and degenerate, then he will certainly fall politically and commit wrongdoings that negatively affect the party and the state.⁶² According to party officials, this “reasoning” is also “very much understood” (很懂得) by the enemy and thus actively utilised by them against the CCP.⁶³ The linking of an official’s morality and his political work is not surprising because in the 1950s party officials on multiple occasions discovered serious local cadre disciplinary problems in which corruption and the dereliction of one’s official duties appeared to go hand in hand with an official’s perceived promiscuous sexual relationships. A 1954 report about the corruption in Anji County 安吉县, a county apparently described by local civilians as a brothel and corruption hub, illustrates in detail the behaviour of some corrupt local officials. One of the men described in this document, the chief of the county’s Public Security Bureau, had multiple affairs and complicated personal relationships with female *tewu*. This included a sexual relationship with the wife of a male *tewu*, and an unauthorised marriage with another female *tewu*. Additionally, on another occasion he invited two female *tewu* who were supposed to be under party supervision to drink liquor in his office.⁶⁴

Perhaps more concerning to party officials were situations in which male CCP officials compromised the party’s security because of their dealings with female *tewu*. One of the things a “fallen” male official did, as illustrated in the 1956 *Party’s Supervision Work* commentary, was find ways to introduce potentially treacherous women of unclear political affiliation into the party and recommend them for governmental jobs. The commentary deduces that this was because male officials were having illicit affairs with these women. Finding them jobs was part of the “fallen men’s” attempts to court and please these women at great risk to the party.⁶⁵ In some cases, the “fallen” man was described as completely abandoning his professional duties and commitment to the party due to his relationship to the female *tewu*. The 1955 ACDWF report, for example, describes how a deputy section chief of an investigation office of the Guangzhou Municipal Public Security Bureau, Zhang Jian 張健, had an affair with a female *tewu* whom he was originally supposed to deal with professionally. Zhang even attempted to secretly appropriate an exit permit (出國證) in order to help her escape.⁶⁶ Likewise, Wang Wenqi of CCP China Youth Press was also accused of remaining “very loyal” (忠心耿耿) to No. 13,

62 *Fandui mouxie Gongchandang yuan fuhua duoluo de xingwei.*

63 *Fandui mouxie Gongchandang yuan fuhua duoluo de xingwei.*

64 Zhejiang shengwei 1954.

65 *Yan’ge jiandu he zhizhi dangyuan geren shenghuo ...*

66 Quanguo fulian dangzu 1955.

with whom he became romantically involved soon after he joined the press, and being “extremely insincere” (極不老實) to the party, abandoning his professional duties due to his relationship.⁶⁷ Because of his illicit relationship with her, “not only did he not enthusiastically participate in struggles” as a member of the press’s committee for elimination of counterrevolutionaries (肅反), “but instead he used his time at work to court XXX (No. 13)” (反而在工作時間和XXX 談情說愛), handing over classified information about the party. Wang apparently went so far as using his position at the press to “obtain information the party had acquired about No. 13,” and “trying to teach her how to deal with the investigation procedure launched against her.”⁶⁸ These examples demonstrate officials’ belief that the party should be able to interfere with (including the use of persuasion and influence, as well as outright rejections or permissions) an individual official’s choices regarding his personal life, as such choices were inherently connected to the wellbeing of the party. Officials also believed that the view in which one should have the utmost freedom regarding one’s personal life, a view apparently held by some within the party, must be rejected and criticised.⁶⁹

We do not know more personal information about No. 13 and the other previously mentioned female *tewu*; neither do we know what happened to these women beyond the likelihood that those who were caught were investigated, tried, and punished by imprisonment or even execution. But it is clear that party officials perceived these women as destructive forces based on active investigations and reports about their own men’s personal experiences and encounters. Officials thus interpreted and understood female *tewu* as those who have the capability to mobilise femininity and dominant gender norms against men, corrupting their own male officials in order to achieve the treacherous aim of gathering intelligence and sabotaging CCP rule. While public mass-mobilisation campaigns and counter-espionage operations were crucial avenues through which the CCP sought to curb and combat the threat of both male and female *tewu*, the CCP also deemed the arts and cultural arena as an important battleground where the party could and should educate not just civilians but also party officials.

67 Zhonggong Zhongguo qingnian chubanshe zongzhi 1955.

68 Zhonggong Zhongguo qingnian chubanshe zongzhi 1955.

69 Quanguo fulian dangzu 1955.

4 The Role of Gendered Narratives and Propaganda about Enemy Female *Tewu*

In 1955, the Ministry of Culture's Film Industry Administration made plans to screen several classic counterespionage films (*fan te pian* 反特片) around the country.⁷⁰ A film critic at *People's Daily* embraced this initiative, stating that "the enemies hidden within the party are more dangerous than the enemies who (operate in) public," and the timely showing of counterespionage films would educate the public on the dirty tricks used by enemies of the people:

These films are records of struggles between the revolutionary and counterrevolutionary, and (the revolutionary's ultimate) success. We can learn a lot from them ... From (these films), we see an apparent truth: the enemy is not sleeping when we are moving forward with our successful revolutionary work. The class that has been defeated has never willingly exited the historical stage. They must struggle, and the means they employ will become ever more despicable, ever more vicious. On the one hand, imperialists will bribe and direct the scum and traitors within the people to engage in sabotage. On the other hand, they will continuously use all kinds of opportunities to deploy a large number of *jiandie* and *tewu*.⁷¹

In the preceding sections, the origin of this awareness regarding the perils of espionage and sabotage was traced back to actual encounters with *tewu* as well as the activities and methods employed by female *tewu* operatives. Given the on-the-ground reality of illicit and destructive relationships between male party members and female *tewu*, CCP officials considered the task of propagating awareness of the dangers of enemy espionage and female *tewu* to be a significant undertaking. Gendered narratives about female *tewu* in the form of dramas, literature, and newspaper articles belonged to broader CCP counterespionage endeavours and were forms of political communication that targeted both civilians and officials.

Prior to the Communist takeover in 1949, the party mobilised the masses for intelligence gathering and counterespionage endeavours.⁷² This approach

70 "Fangjian fante de guanghai bangyang," *RMRB*, August 11, 1955, 3.

71 "Fangjian fante de guanghai bangyang," *RMRB*, August 11, 1955, 3.

72 For example, the Hunan-Hubei-Jiangxi Provincial Political and Security Bureau (*Xiang-E-Gan sheng zhengzhi baoweiju*) declared that the masses must be mobilised to collect enemy intelligence. See Hunan sheng gongqianting et al. 1991, 71.

was sustained by the party after 1949. In 1951 Peng Zhen 彭真, then deputy director of the Political and Legal Committee of the State Council argued in a report presented to the State Council that “it is not solely the work of the People’s Public Security organs against traitors and spies.”⁷³ Instead, the party “must fully mobilise the masses from all walks of life, so that the work of public security and judicial organs in this regard is closely integrated with the masses’ movement to suppress counterrevolutionaries.”⁷⁴ Likewise, a 1951 *People’s Daily* article made apparent that everyone in the country should assist the government in eliminating traitors and preventing espionage. To encourage and mobilise the masses, the article suggested that institutions such as labour unions, Peasant Associations, and Women’s Associations, as well as news, publishing, cultural, educational, and arts organisations must regularly alert the masses about the harm committed by counterrevolutionaries and *tewu*, the dangers they pose and the necessity of their suppression. Moreover, *People’s Daily* argued that this kind of propaganda work was essential, and should be carried out repeatedly and continuously across the country to enhance the masses’ awareness.⁷⁵

As such, cultural works like films and dramas in addition to public journalism played key roles in the party’s counterespionage endeavours, intended to serve as potent, persuasive, yet distinct means of political communication.⁷⁶ Cultural works were meant to educate as well as entertain. For example, film, described by the Party Group of the Ministry of Culture in 1955 as “a propaganda weapon with the most mass character and power” (最有群眾性的有力的宣傳武器), was considered as one of the most useful tools in conveying counterespionage messages.⁷⁷ Given the party’s efforts during the 1950s to produce works that would be popular with the masses, it can be reasonably inferred that plots featuring female *tewu* seductresses and their male lovers were deemed more engaging for the audience than mundane stories depicting *tewu* collecting information from individuals in a non-sexual manner.⁷⁸ Meanwhile, the party adopted a different approach with newspapers, prioritising credibility above entertainment value in order to “accurately propagate and explain the party and government’s principles and policies regarding the handling of counterrevolutionary elements.” For example, newspapers were in 1955 advised in *Newsletter of Propaganda* (*Xuanchuan tongxin* 宣傳通信),

73 Peng Zhen 1951.

74 Peng Zhen 1951.

75 *Renmin ribao* 1971. See also *Renmin ribao* 1955.

76 Lu 2020, 20–21.

77 Wenhua bu dangzu 1955b.

78 Lu Dingyi 1955.

published by the Central Propaganda Department of the CCP, to pay attention to authenticity, evidence, and persuasiveness of materials in order to make logical conclusions from facts. To do so, *Newsletter of Propaganda* suggested that newspaper editors should establish close working relations with public security and judicial departments to effectively carry out such propaganda work.⁷⁹ News about female *tewu*, though still likely to be sensationalised in practice, was at least intended by the central authorities to be believable and effective in alerting and mobilising the masses.

Ultimately, party officials saw a connection between newspaper narratives, popular cultural works, such as literature and films, and the behaviour of individuals, maintaining that individuals are capable of being affected by what they read and see. This is implied in the May 1955 Instruction by the Central Committee of the CCP on handling reactionary, obscene, and absurd publications, and on enhancing the management of private cultural entities and enterprises, which states that the use of popular cultural works is one of the main ways in which the reactionary and corrupting ideology of the “feudal and bourgeois classes” is transmitted among the people.⁸⁰ The May 1955 report compiled by the Ministry of Culture, in which this 1955 Instruction is lodged, makes more explicit the connection between cultural works, which includes those that describe *jiandie* (spy) and *tewu* activity, and people’s behaviour. This report states that “poisonous,” “reactionary,” and “absurd” works were capable of affecting the masses and are “particularly poisonous and harmful to teenagers, youths and children.” Apparently, “after reading these kinds of books,” many people were so affected that “their health deteriorated, (they became) mentally depressed, (they) overthought (and) entered a state of delirium ...” (身體敗壞，精神頹喪，胡思亂想，神志昏迷). The report further links these cultural works to what the party saw as undesirable behaviour with consequences for the enforcement of public security and socialist construction, arguing that owing to the influence of these works:

Some tried to learn sword fighting in the mountains, some frequented vulgar entertainment venues, resulting in the abandonment of their studies and (becoming) passive at work. Several of them among this group of people even founded hooligan organisations.⁸¹

79 *Xuanchuan tongxun* 1955.

80 *Zhonggong zhongyang* 1955.

81 *Wenhua bu dangzu* 1955a.

As a result, the production and dissemination of narratives about the perils of enemy *tewu* and female *tewu* activities were seen by party officials as also being capable of affecting readers, but in what they saw as a more “positive” manner.

Besides attempting to mobilise the masses and exerting more control over society, the party was also concerned with educating and influencing its own officials. This was because these popular cultural works and newspapers reached not only the people but also the inner ranks of the CCP. In the previously mentioned 1955 ACDWF report about party officials having relationships with enemy female *tewu*, the case of Wang Wenqi and No. 13 as well as other honey trap cases are cited as examples of how the party was being impacted by real enemy activity. Thus, to remedy the situation, the ACDWF suggests that the party “should educate all male and female party officials to put themselves in the position of the party.”⁸² To do so, the strategic use of narratives and discourses would be crucial in combating “corrupt and degenerate thinking and behaviour that have foundations deeply embedded in history and society”:

It is an arduous process of struggle to eliminate this phenomenon. But if the party can find out in time (about the corrupt behaviour of its officials), increase its surveillance (of officials), take it seriously and effectively lead and organise discourse using party periodicals, newspapers, magazines, films, theatre, novels, and other propaganda tools, or to expose these sorts of bad things in meetings, to condemn them morally, to mobilise the masses in order to boycott (these behaviours), then this kind of behaviour might gradually be decreased and restricted. This can save many comrades and is beneficial to the party.⁸³

The ACDWF’s position was not a fringe one within the party. Upon receiving this report from the ACDWF, the Central Committee endorsed it by forwarding it in January 1956 to other committees, bureaus, and departments, noting that “the various kinds of methods as mentioned in the report are also correct.”⁸⁴

Whether newspapers and cultural works such as films, drama, and literature can indeed negatively or positively impact people’s behaviour is arguable, and this issue has long been a matter of debate in political and academic realms both within and beyond China.⁸⁵ However, during the early PRC, the idea that

82 Quanguo fulian dangzu 1955.

83 Quanguo fulian dangzu 1955.

84 Zhonggong zhongyang 1956.

85 For example, see debates about whether video games can cause violence and aggression in those who play them: Drummond et al. 2020, 200373.

publicly accessible cultural works affect viewers' and readers' behaviour was a key premise in the party's thinking regarding the role and utilisation of popular cultural works and narratives as forms of political communication. Moreover, these popular narratives were seen to have an impact on both the people and the party's own officials. Comprehending this logic improves our understanding of the party's concern with the production, circulation, and utilisation of mass narratives about female *tewu* and honey traps.

5 Conclusion

This article enriches our understanding not just of gendered narratives about female *tewu*, but also of wartime realities, secret warfare in the early PRC, and the experiences and mentalities of CCP officials. In the 1950s, there were gendered enemy activities within PRC territories that affected both civilians and party officials, as internal party sources, party publications and official instructions reveal.⁸⁶ CCP officials concerned with the party's security believed that there were many instances where CCP-affiliated men were being targeted by enemy women, who weaponised aspects of their femininity to lure these unsuspecting men to give away vital party intelligence or to do things they would otherwise not have done. Wang Zheng notes how, in the post-Mao period, elite men in the PRC became more vocal about their tastes in women, with some saying that they had actually always preferred and were attracted to "sexy female spies or other counterrevolutionary" type characters, instead of archetypal revolutionary heroines such as "Iron Ladies" (鐵娘子).⁸⁷ Indeed, it may not be surprising that heterosexual men during the Mao and post-Mao eras were drawn to women who embodied characteristics of the female *tewu*, as these women were intended to be attractive to them. The CCP was aware of heterosexual men's susceptibility and enemy endeavours that utilised this tactic. As such, the CCP's "anxieties" about enemy *tewu* activity as well as the utilisation of these patriarchal and propagandist narratives about female *tewu* were rational responses to real and significant threats.⁸⁸

This article also finds that for both officials and the people, being embedded in a gendered culture of counterespionage was a more significant part of everyday life during the early years of Maoist China than previously assumed. It therefore echoes as well as builds on the arguments from existing

86 Du 2017, 162.

87 Wang 2016, 230.

88 Du 2017, 162.

studies on Chinese propaganda and culture during wartime. Louise Edwards' ground-breaking research demonstrates that militarism extends beyond mere military expenditures. Additionally, militarism encompasses the careful cultivation of a militarised mindset within the public via the fostering of a culture of war.⁸⁹ In the same way, this article shows that counterespionage endeavours go beyond official programs to include a culture where gendered propaganda plays a crucial role.

The party was not only concerned with strengthening its power and control over society as John Delury asserts,⁹⁰ but it hoped its propaganda would positively influence its own officials, the majority of whom were men.⁹¹ From this article we therefore learn that these gendered cultural works such as films and dramas, and public narratives, from newspapers to periodicals, were an important part of the CCP's counterespionage endeavours and complemented official public security programmes that targeted both civilians and officials. Above all, we learn that comprehending popular culture and other narratives related to female spies, which were constructed and/or utilised by the CCP, requires a contextualised examination of how party officials perceived, interpreted, and experienced honey traps. Merely thinking of cultural works and public narratives during this period as state propaganda primarily shaped by ideology or general sentiments and events precludes nuances and complexities behind the making and utilisation of these works, as well as more interesting details about people's experiences and thinking in the past.

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89 Edwards 2016, 2.

90 Delury 2022.

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