

Title: “Productive Rhythms”: The Sounds of China through Soviet Ears
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In the mid-1920s, while the Komintern sought to support and guide the revolutionary movement in China, a host of Soviet writers and journalists traveled to that country to report on events there for a Soviet audience. In the texts this movement produced, there is a striking emphasis on the representation of sound. A particular group of sounds recurs constantly in these accounts, forming what we might call the Soviet sound-image of China: the calls of load-carrying coolies, the sound-signatures of street traders in Beijing, and the melodies of instrumentalized Chinese music.

Analyzing these representations of Chinese sound in the works of Sergei Tret'iakov, Boris Pil'niak, Oskar Erdberg, and Nikolai Kostarev, I argue that this drive to interpret or decode these alien sounds as comprehensible messages enacts in microcosm the Soviet effort to strip China of its distancing strangeness and represent it instead as a commensurable social system subject to the same basic economic forces. For Kostarev and Erdberg, the repetitious calls of load carriers (what Kostarev dubs “productive rhythms”) represent the monotonous, repetitive essence of labour under capitalism, an escape from which is offered by alternative forms of music, the “Internationale” (Erdberg) or the “music of the revolution” (Kostarev). For Pil'niak the same sounds produce a nostalgic connection with the Volga barge haulers of his childhood, and a consequent thesis on trans-Eurasian identity; a later song for voice and violin, however, produces an opposite reaction of estrangement and even suffering. Lastly, in his poem “Roar China!,” Tret'iakov seeks to de-exoticize the various calls of Beijing street traders and craftsmen, interpreting them all as containing the same basic message: a call to anti-imperialist uprising, replacing the diverse sound-patterns of China with the singular injunction of Tret'iakov's title.