

One of the ways in which the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Communist Party (CCP) defined itself was through propaganda art. Throughout its long history, the Chinese political system has used the arts to present and spread correct behaviour and thought. Literature, poetry, painting, stage plays, songs and other artistic forms were produced to entertain, but they also had to educate the people in what was considered right and wrong.

'Life as it ought to be': propaganda art of the PRC

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In the PRC, propaganda art gave concrete expression to the abstract policies and the many different grandiose visions of the future that the CCP entertained. In a country with as many illiterates as China had in the 1940s and 1950s, visualising abstract ideas worked especially.

The most talented artists were mobilised to design posters. Many of them had been commercial designers and were quickly co-opted. The idealised images not only showed 'life as it really is', but also 'life as it ought to be', stressing the positive and glossing over anything negative. Original works of art were reproduced in journals and magazines. Large posters could be seen in the streets, in railway stations and other public spaces; the smaller ones were distributed through the network of the *Xinhua* (New China) bookshops for mass consumption; some were even turned into postage stamps.

Posters could be produced cheaply and easily. They were widely available and could be seen everywhere. And they provided an excellent way to bring some colour to the otherwise drab places where most people lived. Posters reached even the lowest levels of society: multicoloured posters adorned not only offices and factories, but houses and dormitories as well. Most people liked the posters for their colours, composition and visual contents, and did not pay too much attention to the political message.

The contents of the posters were largely defined by the themes of politics and economic reconstruction that were dominant after 1949. Hyper-realistic ageless, larger-than-life peasants, soldiers, workers and youngsters in dynamic poses peopled the images. They pledged allegiance to the Communist cause, or obedience to Chairman Mao Zedong, or were engaged in the glorious task of rebuilding the nation. Most posters glorified work and personal sacrifice for the greater well-being. They paid little attention to the personal and private dimensions of the people's lives.



Forging ahead courageously while following the great leader Chairman Mao. Publisher: Shanghai renmin meishu chubanshe, collective work. April 1969. 72 x 106,5cm. Collectie IISG



New view in the rural village. Designer: Xin Liliang. 1953, Sanyi Printers. 53,5 x 77,5cm. Collection International Institute for Social History.

In the early 1950s, the printing industry was nationalised and a few large producers of propaganda posters emerged. They included the People's Fine Arts Publishing House in Beijing and the Shanghai People's Fine Arts Publishing House. Until well into the 1980s, these publishers would dominate the field. Other specialised publishing houses put out materials as well. The Inner Mongolian People's Publishing House, for example, specialised in (bi- and multi-lingual) posters about and for national minorities, while posters devoted to sports and physical education were published by the Sports Publishing House in Beijing. During the Cultural Revolution, poster production was largely decentralised. In the 1980s, the predominance of the Beijing and Shanghai establishments eroded and other publishers took over. Propaganda posters have been around for more than six decades, and

as a result, they form a body of materials that is incredibly rich in information. They are important for what they show, but maybe even more for what they fail to pay attention to...

Art and propaganda posters

What exactly is a propaganda poster? According to many artists and designers the term propaganda art cannot be used indiscriminately to cover all art that has been produced in the PRC. In their opinion, poster art should be divided into discrete genres such as New Year prints (*nianhua*), oil paintings (*youhua*), gouache (*shuifenhua*), woodcuts (*mubanhua*), traditional paintings (*Zhongguo hua*), propaganda posters (*xuanchuan hua*), etc. This classification is inspired largely by the way the arts sector was ordered bureaucratically in China. Water colourists did not mix with oil

painters, woodcutters worked separately from traditional painters, and propaganda posters artists were at the bottom of the hierarchy. Artists maintain that art can only be called propaganda art when it contains one or more politically inspired slogans. Some of the posters indeed do have explicit political or propagandistic contents, while others do not. Similarly, some contain one or more politically inspired slogans, but not all of them do.

But in my discussions with various artists and designers, many insisted that they themselves had mixed up the fine distinctions between the various styles in the days of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, when all art had to have propaganda value.

The roots of Chinese propaganda art

From its inception, the CCP had been imbued with the cultural iconoclasm of the May Fourth New Culture Movement (1919-1921). During the First United Front with the Nationalist Party (Guomindang, GMD) in 1924-1927, the CCP set out to replace 'old culture' and to control public opinion through propaganda, agitation and political education, employing forms and techniques originating in the Soviet Union. In the Jiangxi Soviet (1931-1934), the CCP further developed its strategy of using the arts to educate the people in both literacy and loyalty to the Party.¹

In Yan'an, where the CCP found itself after the Long March (1934-1935), the use of art as a catalyst for change was further refined. This was to counter GMD-propaganda, but also to neutralise the propaganda of the Japanese that had invaded China in 1937. The latter justified the Japanese military presence and warned against co-operating with either Nationalists or Communists. In 1942, Mao Zedong made it clear that arts had to serve politics, in the form of the demands made by the CCP.² In order to accommodate and reach the largely illiterate peasants, the Party decided to address them in the traditional medium of New Year prints.

These 'new' New Year prints were based on calendar posters, traditional painting and popular block prints. They employed old visual elements with new contents and manipulated symbols used in traditional popular culture and traditional values. The peasantry responded positively to their familiar visual idiom; they liked their *nianhua* realistic, as long as their portrayal of events was a little more beautiful than actual reality.

Adjustments to propaganda art

But traditional or even 'new' New Year prints were considered as insufficient or not modern enough. Already prior to the victory over the GMD, it was felt that the arts also had to address the audience of urbanites who were still unfamiliar with, and potentially hostile to, the Party. The Chinese leaders were convinced that Socialist Realism, as it had been practiced in the Soviet Union since the 1930s, was the best tool for this. The bright colours and the happy and prosperous atmosphere that radiated from Socialist Realism were seen as a continuation of the essential features of the New Year prints. In the period 1949-1957, many Chinese painters studied Socialist Realism in Soviet art academies and Soviet professors came to teach in Chinese institutions.

During the Great Leap Forward (1958-1960), Mao insisted that the gloomi-

ness of 'pure' Soviet Socialist Realism was inappropriate now that enthusiasm ran high. Romanticism had to make the arts more visionary, to imbue the people with a spirit of self-sacrifice, hope and enthusiasm to overcome concrete obstacles. The effects that posters had on mobilising the work force convinced the propaganda workers of their usefulness. The hugely increased demands for art, however, created many opportunities for amateur peasant and worker painters. The 'official' artists who had been trained in the art academies considered these amateurs as talented, but not as true artists.

By 1962, Mao had been pushed out of the centre of power. His artistic policies were also dismissed. The idealistic and heroic images were replaced by more romantic visualisations of the good life that the people led under

socialism. Quite a few 'pretty-girl pictures' featuring female beauties, without (hidden) political messages, were produced.

The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) saw the return of political elements in art. Every element of poster design was imbued with political symbolism, ranging from the use of colours to the exact placement of persons within a composition. Many of the posters produced in the early phases of the Cultural Revolution clearly were made for local purposes. With their black, red and white colouring, which is unique for this period, they give the impression of having been produced as block prints. We shouldn't be fooled, however, by what looks like localised designs. Even for these 'spontaneous', 'local' posters, the central levels provided the examples.³

A change of policy, a change of style

Although the CCP continued to impose its image of society, an unprecedented liberalisation in the arts and visual propaganda took place once Deng Xiaoping took over in 1978. The period ended the use of Socialist Realism as the sole principle of creation.⁴ Western visual elements made their way into China as a result of the opening-up of the country. Posters served glimpses of a future crowded with spacecraft that were clearly modelled on the NASA Space Shuttle; high-speed bullet-trains; high-rise buildings; and highways with gridlocked cars. This science fiction has become reality in the urban consumer society that came about in the 1990s, with its Carrefour supermarkets and McDonalds franchises.

The CCP's inability to win the hearts and minds of the people has become acute. Has the propaganda poster become obsolete? Has it become a medium that is identified mainly with a period when the lives of the Chinese were dominated by political struggles? It is certain that the propaganda that called for class struggle, for grasping the key link, or for obedience, no longer has any effects. The public perceives politics is irrelevant, dead and uninteresting. Government prescriptions about how to lead one's life are considered old-fashioned, out of touch with reality and boring. Commercialism and consumerism are very much alive. And the quality of the posters falls short of the increasingly high design standards that are applied in advertising. On the other hand, posters have been used with some success to create environmental awareness and to correct problems related to public morality and civic virtue. They now provide public service and information contents, as the SARS posters in 2003 did, or focus on neutral subjects such as the Beijing Olympics 2008.

Not much is left of a genre that once was intended to inspire the Chinese people, to mobilise them, and to point them the way to a future Communist utopia. Political posters are still available, but only collectors from China and the West are interested in them. The images that once defined the way China looked have disappeared.

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References

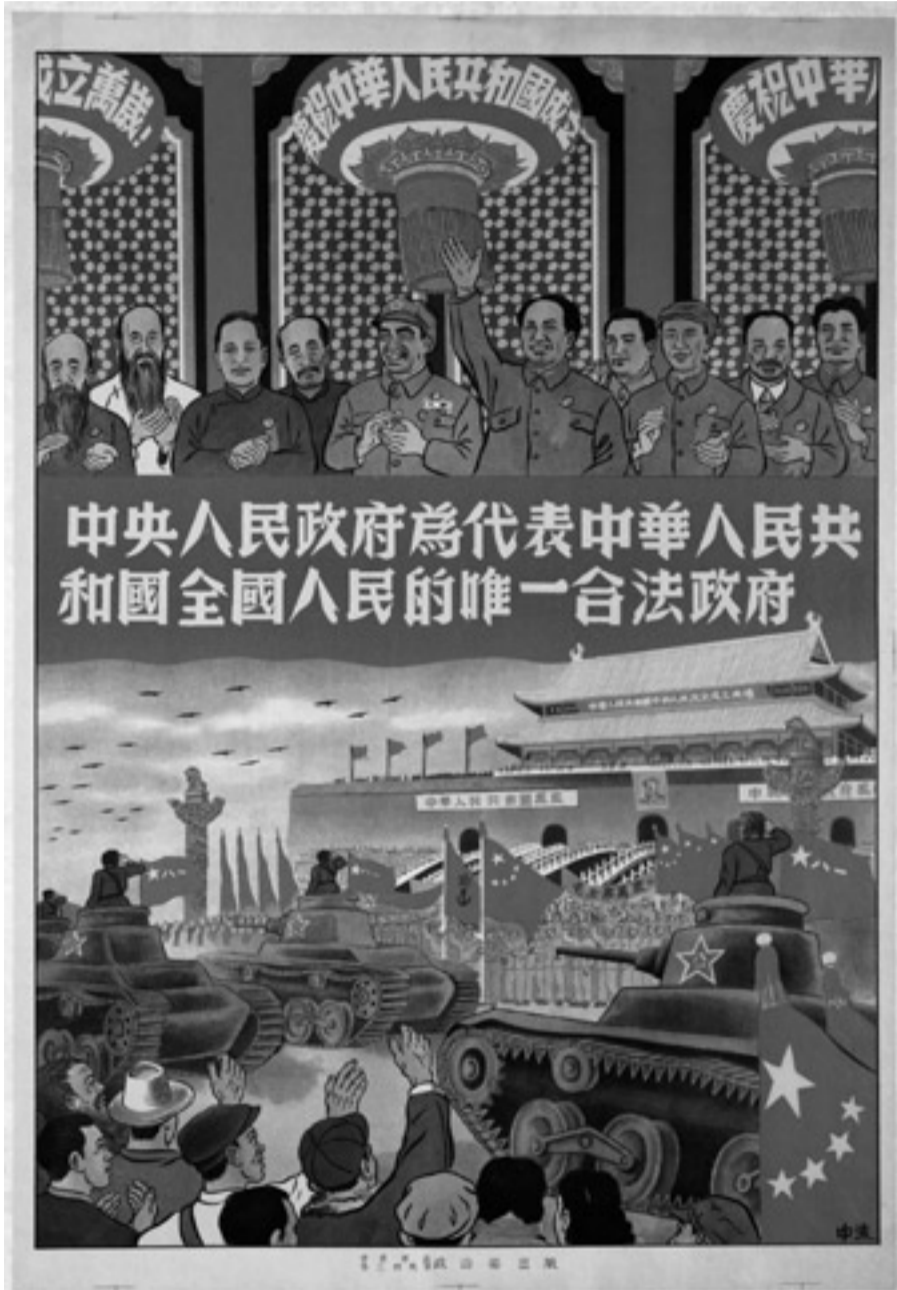
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China in posters - the dreamt reality

167 Highlights from the collections of the International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam, and Stefan R. Landsberger (University of Amsterdam, Leiden University).

These posters are on display from 14 June to 21 September 2008, in the Kunsthall, Rotterdam, The Netherlands. Address: Museumpark, Westzeedijk 341, 3015 AA Rotterdam. Opening hours: Tuesday till Saturday 10am-5pm, Sundays and Holidays 11am-5pm

No plans to visit the Netherlands this Summer? Lack of time? Go to <http://chineseposters.net> for the web exhibition!



The central people's government constitutes the only legitimate government of all the people of the People's Republic of China. Publisher: Political Department of the East China Military Region, Third Field Army. Ca. 1950. 78,5 x 54,5cm. Collection International Institute of Social History.



Long live chairman Mao! Long long live! Shanghai Fine Arts Academy Work. Propaganda Team. Revolutionary Committee collective work. Publisher: Shanghai renmin chubanshe. October 1970. 53 x 77cm. Collectie IISG.