The Aesthetics of Revolution: Chinese Propaganda and the Anthony E. Clark Chinese Poster Collection

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THE AESTHETICS OF REVOLUTION: CHINESE PROPAGANDA AND THE ANTHONY E. CLARK CHINESE POSTER COLLECTION

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I. Introduction

Posters were first widely used in China by their political system in order to propagate correct behavior and thought. Artistic expressions such as literature, poetry, painting, stage plays, and songs were produced with a dual didactic function: to entertain and instill Chinese principles. Once the People’s Republic of China was established in 1949, propaganda art continued to be one of the major means to provide examples of correct behavior.\(^1\) Posters became such an effective medium of communication that many Chinese businesses adopted stylistic principals from the political posters in order to convey their commercial agenda.\(^2\) Cheap and easy to produce, posters were widely available. The multicolored posters could be seen adorning walls not only in offices and factories but also in houses and dormitories, penetrating every level of social organization.\(^3\) Their cheerful visual rhetoric encouraged the posters to be received publicly as works of art, allowing the intended message of the posters, either political or commercial, to be passed on in an almost subconscious manner. However, were Chinese posters truly effective in shaping the behavior of Chinese citizens? How did these powerful vessels of propaganda evolve? This essay utilizes Anthony E. Clark’s Chinese poster collection in order to examine the cultural implications of Chinese propaganda posters and commercial advertisements. It seeks to question the power of the poster as a communicative medium and the importance of visual communicative methods in shaping the identity of a nation.

Through five thousand years of history, Chinese politics have made extensive use of the arts to propagate correct behavior and thought. The general idea was that as long as the state provided

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examples of proper, or correct, behavior, this automatically would lead the people to believe what was considered “proper to believe.”

This practice did not stop once the People’s Republic of China was established in 1949. On the contrary, propaganda art continued to be seen as one of the major means to illustrate the ‘correct’ policies of the moment and the Chinese Communist Party’s visions of the future, especially for those who could not read [Figure 1]. During the expansive political mass campaigns of the late 1950s and 1960s, in particular in the time of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, propaganda posters even came to dominate communications between the leadership and the people. In these years, the propaganda poster reached the peak of artistic expression, both in form and contents; the best available artists were employed to visualize the political trends of the moment in the most detailed way. Once the artists completed an image, the posters were reproduced in as many copies as possible to create a maximum effect.

Through its complete control of both artists and the publishing sector, the Chinese Communist Party was able to enforce its interpretation of reality and aesthetics on the population. As opposed to other images to decorate the home with, propaganda art was widely available and thus penetrated into the lowest form of social organization and cohabitation: the multi-colored posters could be seen adorning walls in houses and dormitories. Their composition and visual content appealed to the viewers, while their political message was passed on in an almost subconscious manner.

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5 Justice, *China’s Design Revolution*, 16.
6 Ibid, 21.
8 Ibid.
During the Cultural Revolution, as he had said before while at Yan’an, Mao Zedong insisted all art had to serve the people and the political agenda of the Party, thus all posters from this time period can be considered propaganda. Some have explicit political or propagandistic content - others do not. Similarly, some contain one or more politically inspired slogans, but not all of them. Propaganda posters were produced in various artistic genres that were popular in China. Some were inspired by the genre of the New Year prints that had been produced for centuries; others were reproductions of oil paintings, or based on gouache, woodcuts, and traditional paintings. By analyzing these artistic interpretations of reality as dictated by Party-leadership, the numerous political and social changes that have occurred in China in the last fifty years will be chronicled at the same time. The history and development of the Chinese propaganda poster is like the history and development of modern China itself. This makes the Chinese propaganda poster an interesting and important source for better understanding China’s modern expressions of art and ideology.

II. Anthony E Clark’s Chinese Poster Collection

Anthony Clark’s Chinese poster collection surveys fifty years (1930’s-1980’s) of visual propaganda and provides significant insight into major cultural and design shifts that were influential on the societal and political sphere within Chinese culture [Figure 2]. The collection consists largely of propaganda posters from the Cultural Revolution and Deng Xiaoping eras during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. The collection as a whole consists of various poster styles and content, providing a complete narration of the changing visual rhetoric Chairman Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communist Party used in order to create a “people’s” art and envision a unified utopia. Within the collection, the propaganda poster category and can be subcategorized into woodblock prints, portraits of generals, photo reproductions, color posters, posters conveying moral ethics, folk art,

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and post-Mao iconography; essential styles for understanding the visual language of this specific geographic and political space.\textsuperscript{12}

The Collection is comprised of two different collector contributions, Anthony Clark, professor of Chinese history at Whitworth University and Lindaman Endowed Chair, and Kelley Robinson, a Spokane local and collector of Chinese antiquities from whom Clark acquired some of the posters. Kelley Robinson is an extensive Chinese traveler who donated various personal and Chinese ephemera to Whitworth University in the spring of 2015.\textsuperscript{13} It is unclear exactly why Robinson collected the Chinese posters, though his collection consisted mainly of posters from the 1970s and 1980s. In addition to the posters, Robinson donated several photo series from his travelling. The backgrounds of some of his images are of Chinese propaganda posters mounted in various public spaces. Similar to Robinson, Anthony Clark collected posters during his travels to China. In his various visits, Clark would intentionally seek out antique shops and markets for propaganda posters. In addition, during his time at the University of Alabama, Clark’s colleague and friend, Ronald Robel, retired professor of history at the University of Alabama, gifted him with propaganda posters. Clark’s contribution encompasses the majority of the collection, including the wood block prints, photo reproductions, and post-Mao iconography.\textsuperscript{14} Together these materials provide an analysis of the power of the poster as a communicative medium and the importance of visual communicative methods in shaping the identity of the Chinese nation.

III. Constructing a Political Rhetoric: Evolving Styles of the Chinese Propaganda Posters

Before the establishment of the Peoples Republic in 1949, a long search had been underway for a style to portray the accomplishments of the revolution.\textsuperscript{15} The traditional arts were considered ill

\textsuperscript{12} Anthony E. Clark Chinese Poster Collection, Special Collections, Whitworth University, Spokane, WA.
\textsuperscript{13} Anthony E. Clark Chinese Poster Collection, Special Collections, Whitworth University, Spokane, WA.
\textsuperscript{14} Information gathered from interview with Dr. Anthony Clark in of October 2016.
equipped to serve the political goals of the Party: instead of addressing the elite, as the arts had always done, the “broad masses of the people” now had to be reached. After the Long March, the Chinese Communist Party finally had the opportunity to devote time and energy to that aspect of its work among the masses. In Yan’an, the area in the Northwest where the Chinese Communist Party established itself, the arts were first used as a catalyst for changes in the attitudes, behavior and culture of the peasantry. Propaganda art was created specifically to support political campaigns. Moreover, propaganda posters were widely used to mobilize the people in a struggle of resistance against the Japanese troops, which had invaded ever-larger parts of China since 1932. In order to accommodate and reach the largely illiterate peasants, the Party had to address them in terms of their own psychology and experience, by using reworked forms of art and images that were current among the people at the time. The medium of the New Year prints in particular was considered the most efficient for this goal [Figure 3].

New Year pictures made use of elements of folk art and symbolism catered to the tastes and beliefs in the countryside; they provided protection, or expressed wishes for happiness and good luck. There were numerous varieties of New Year prints, which on the first day of the New Year would be stuck on the front gates, doors onto the courtyards, walls of a room, water vat, rice cabinet, granary, or livestock fold. The prints did not necessarily spell out officially sanctioned behavior, but were created in an environment that was permeated by Confucianism, and, almost as a rule, they contained hints of what was considered to be desired behavior. In this way they drove home the Confucian values among the illiterate peasant population. And they used symbols that were traditionally seen as auspicious, including mythological personages like the “Kitchen God, the

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17 Justice, *China’s Design Revolution*, 47.
18 Ibid.
Door God and the God of Longevity”; such prints functioned as magical charms to drive away bad luck.\(^{21}\) This undoubtedly is the reason for their popularity among large sections of the population and encouraged their distribution throughout the country.

Advertising companies in China have favored posters since the 19\(^{th}\) century. From the middle of the 19\(^{th}\) century onward, numerous foreign companies settled along the eastern seaboard. The advertising agencies acting as their media agents introduced Western art techniques.\(^{22}\) These companies were instrumental in bringing large amounts of visual materials to the people, in the form of illustrated calendars, posters, handbills and scrolls. These materials were designed by Chinese artists to cater to the specific Chinese taste; they were produced using some of the most sophisticated imported printing technologies and were distributed free of charge.\(^{23}\) The calendars, posters, and scrolls were meant to promote the sales of cigarettes, fabrics, medicines or beverages. Almost as a rule, they showed pictures of attractive females; some of them even featured girls with bare breasts, or even completely nude, though these depictions were rare [Figure 4].\(^{24}\)

Advertisements were particularly common in the countryside. There, they competed with New Year prints for the attention of the household and had a profound impact. The advertisements blended with Art Nouveau, formed a major influence on Chinese art and design in the 1920s.\(^{25}\) In a way, this commercial style, also called the “Shanghai Style,” became a standard for the way in which mass produced images were designed.

The political limitations on art in a Socialist society under the Chinese Communist Party-rule had already been formulated in 1942. Mao Zedong, the Party-leader, stressed that the arts had to serve the “broad masses of the people,” and made it clear that artistic modes of expression should

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be used that were popular among the people.²⁶ More importantly, arts and artists had to serve politics, that is to say the demands made by the Party; since the Party, considered itself to be the spokesperson of the masses.²⁷ Mao summed up his expectations of revolutionary art by demanding a “unity of politics, and art, a unity of content and form, a unity of revolutionary political content and the most perfect artistic form possible.”²⁸ Combining “old forms,” or the “already existing sense of style among the common people,” with new contents.²⁹ Politics should create this unity. These decisions meant the end for the “Shanghai Style” because of its link with advertising, and because of the fact that the more puritanical Party leaders frowned upon the frivolous women that these earlier posters depicted, they were condemned as “bourgeois and unhealthy.”³⁰

The “new” New Year prints produced under Party-guidance came in the form of crude propaganda pictures, for which soldiers, workers and militiamen posed and which were painted on walls and houses. One form of propaganda pictures that was used from 1943 on was the “leaders portrait;” these portraits featured local, national and international figures, military and political leaders, and labor and hygiene models [Figure 5]. Such pictures sometimes were sold, but were also given away as prizes.³¹ The peasantry liked the old visual idiom and symbolism in these colorful images that was used by the Chinese Communist Party to propagate Socialist principals. New Year prints were realistically rendered, as long as their portrayal of events was more beautiful and aesthetically pleasing than actual reality.³² Moreover, the “new” New Year posters were able to replace the traditional New Year prints due to the Party succeeding in establishing a control over

²⁶ Landsberger, *Chinese Propaganda*, 50.
²⁹ Ibid.
³⁰ Ibid.
culture. The Party established a monopoly over the media and therefore prohibited the production and distribution of traditional New Year prints.\textsuperscript{33}

With the success of the “new” New Year posters, the Chinese Communist Party leadership continued to monopolize on the power of the Chinese poster. In an urban context, the New Year posters were deemed not “modern enough” due to their ability to only positively influence the thoughts and sympathies of large sections of the peasantry.\textsuperscript{34} The Party sought to utilize the arts to unify the entire nation, thus the arts also had to be directed toward an audience of newly liberated urban centers who were still largely unfamiliar with, and possibly hostile to, Communism.\textsuperscript{35}

**III. Socialist Realism**

Early on in the development of the Chinese Communist Party, leadership drew inspiration from the Soviet Union for a number of concepts and institutions to rule the nation.\textsuperscript{36} This search included the development of visual propaganda for city dwellers that was completely different from the “Shanghai Style.” As a result, Mao and other Chinese leaders were convinced that Socialist Realism, as it has been practiced in the Soviet Union since the 1930s, was the best tool to develop new forms of art.\textsuperscript{37} Because of the bright colors and the happy and prosperous atmosphere that is characteristic of Socialist Realism. It was seen as a continuation of the essential features of the New Year prints, while at the same time new modernized elements were used.\textsuperscript{38} What had to be discarded, was the traditional symbolism that made New Year prints magical charms to ward off bad luck. This symbolism undoubtedly contributed to the prints’ popularity among the people, but the Party considered such symbols superstitious.\textsuperscript{39} Socialist Realism, then, became the accepted manner

\textsuperscript{33} Chiu and Sheng, *Art and China’s Revolution*, 12.
\textsuperscript{34} Crushing and Tompkins, *Chinese Posters*, 31.
\textsuperscript{35} Crushing and Tompkins, *Chinese Posters*, 31.
\textsuperscript{37} Crushing Tompkins, *Chinese Posters*, 42.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid, 43.
of representing the future after the People’s Republic of China was founded in 1949. Socialist Realism was the dominant form of artistic expression in the Soviet Union. In Socialist Realism, an image is structured as a narrative, something which is not merely to be seen or to be understood, but which can also be “read” as a story containing numerous meanings. It is subjected to a number of codes. First of all, the main subject of the image is located in or near the center, and usually illuminated by a natural or artificial source of light. The representation of the subject is highly colored and detailed. These are not the only reasons why all attention is drawn to the main subject. Its placement at the top of an imaginary, triangular ground plain, with the secondary subjects along the diagonal side, is even more instrumental in drawing the viewer’s eye and attention. This spatial device, moreover, serves as a wedge from the foreground into the middle, adding depth to the painting [Figure 6]. Secondly, Socialist Realism portrays the future in the present, not only showing “life as it really is” but also “life as it ought to be” or the revolutionary development, which takes place “in the spirit of Socialism.” Stressing the positive and illuminating anything negative. Socialist Realism, blended with the traditional elements and specific Chinese artistic techniques that increased the poster’s appeal to the masses. It also portrayed idealized social and political behavioral models, or learning objects: ordinary men and woman engaged in the creation of this better future. In this way, the bright side of life of the real heroes, the representative of the new people, striving for a new world, was shown. It depicted “life” truthfully and in its revolutionary development, not merely as an objective reality. It provided a realistic view of life, represented in the rosy colors of optimism,

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43 Ibid, 19.
44 Ibid.
and largely seen through an urban lens.\textsuperscript{47} Socialist Realism focused on industrial plants, blast furnaces, power stations, construction sites and people at work, and stressed the importance of economic and industrial development of the country.\textsuperscript{48} All this corresponded well with the Chinese policy that art should serve politics.

In the period 1949-1957, many Chinese painters studied Socialist Realism in Soviet art academies; others were educated by Soviet professors who came to teach in Chinese institutions.\textsuperscript{49} Some of the artists who had become exponents of the “Shanghai Style” initially also tried their hands at this new mode of expression. They were given the opportunity – or in some cases forced by the Party – to study real life, “to live with the people,” and to spend time in factories and in the countryside, in order to be able to produce images that were true to life.\textsuperscript{50}

IV. Art as Behavioral Instruction

The use of models played an important role in the political thought of Mao Zedong. He was convinced that everybody had to be made constantly aware of what constitutes correct behavior, and what conduct was deemed unacceptable; he believed that correct ideas followed automatically from proper behavior.\textsuperscript{51} This was not something Mao had invented, it rather builds upon ideas that had been developed over centuries by Chinese philosophers: that people could be formed and transformed.\textsuperscript{52} According to Mao, when an ordinary person is confronted with a model of ideal behavior, he will feel a desire to remake himself. He states, “… it is only through repeated education by positive and negative examples and through comparisons and contrasts that revolutionary parties and revolutionary people can temper themselves, become mature and make sure of victory.”\textsuperscript{53}

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{48} Bonnell, \textit{Iconography of Power}, 19.
\textsuperscript{50} Min and Wolf, \textit{Chinese Propaganda Posters}, 30.
\textsuperscript{51} Heisey, \textit{Chinese Perspectives in Rhetoric and Communication}, 53.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid, 54.
The early years of the People’s Republic of China were a time of hope and support for the Party. The posters of this period truly reflect the enthusiasm that existed among the population. Despite the numerous political campaigns organized to increase or consolidate popular support for various aspects of Communist rule. To combat corruption and bureaucracy, politics were not the most important subject.\(^5^4\) Everybody seemed to be willing to join the enormous effort that was required to create a new Socialist world in a country that was devastated by decades of war and internal strife, and the propaganda reflected that desire.\(^5^5\) During the “Great Leap Forward” campaign in the late 1950s, things changed dramatically in all fields of life. In the arts, Mao cryptically insisted that Soviet Socialist Realism should be replaced by a “fusion of revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism.”\(^5^6\) In this fusion, “revolutionary realism takes realism as its keynote, and blends it with romanticism,” and “revolutionary romanticism takes romanticism as its keynote, but blends it with realism.”\(^5^7\) Art should “convey the most romantic and glamorous views of the motherland, social, economic and political triumphs, the strength, courage, and resourcefulness of the people, and the wisdom of their leaders.

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\(^5^6\) Landsberger, *Chinese Propaganda*, 38.
\(^5^7\) Ibid.
In reality, propaganda art had to become more intrinsically Chinese. The element of romanticism made the arts more visionary, and provided and even rosier representation of Chinese reality. It had to instill in the population the spirit of self-sacrifice, hope and enthusiasm to overcome concrete obstacles by pure willpower.\(^{58}\) The atmosphere during the “Great Leap” was one of absolute optimism and belief in the ability of the people to end China’s backwardness and to turn the country into an advanced nation overnight. A typical subject of the time was people operating backyard furnaces, where everybody was supposed to personally contribute to the production of steel. These models were used by the Chinese Communist Party to demonstrate that by purely relying on will power, the people would be able to bring about a quick transformation of the concrete obstacles they encountered in the physical world.\(^{59}\) Within less than two years, the movement proved to be a disaster. Instead of becoming an advanced nation, China suffered from disastrous famines, claiming an estimated forty million lives, which resulted from the failures of the Great Leap.\(^{60}\) It is no coincidence that particularly in the years following the movement a large number of posters produced had iconography that featured great amounts of foods.\(^{61}\)

**V. Mao and the Power of the Poster as a Tool for the Masses**

By 1962, Mao had been pushed out of the center of politics and power as a result of the failures of the Great Leap Forward movement for which he was held responsible. Under the rule of Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping, politics and economic developments returned to the predictability of the early 1950s.\(^{62}\) By applying a less strict interpretation of ideology they were rather successful in countering the negative effects of Mao’s calamitous economic policies. Mao’s artistic policies also

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\(^{58}\) Ibid, 6.  
\(^{60}\) Chiu and Sheng, *Art and China’s Revolution*, 32.  
\(^{61}\) Ibid.  
were dismissed: the attention devoted to politics and the heroic characters in Socialist Realism art was replaced by a more balanced treatment of the so-called “middle characters,” people who could neither be classified as heroes, nor as villains.\textsuperscript{63} More room was left for personal doubts and individual shortcomings, to make subjects more recognizable and true to life. The idealistic and heroic images were replaced by more romantic visualizations of the good life that the people led under socialism. Quite a few “pretty-girl pictures,” art featuring female beauties in an aesthetically pleasant way, without any hidden political message, were produced.\textsuperscript{64}

Mao did everything in his power to regain his influence and position. In order to do so, he increasingly found fault with the policies of the leaders who had succeeded him.\textsuperscript{65} One of the most important results was that they were able to bring an end to the famines. This was more than Mao could bear, and he advocated the unleashing of a Socialist Education Movement in an attempt to “inoculate” the peasantry against the temptations of feudalism and the sprouts of capitalism, which in his analysis were re-emerging in the countryside. Large doses of didactic politicized art; both in the form of images and literature were produced as a “serum for this inoculation process.”\textsuperscript{66} The Party bureaucracy, in the meantime, tried everything in its power to block Mao’s initiatives, and because of the Party’s obstructions Mao became convinced that the Chinese Communist Party opposed him. Accusing the Party of “revisionism,” he turned towards the only organization he considered trustworthy: The People’s Liberation Army.\textsuperscript{67}

The People’s Liberation Army had been active in the field of propaganda art during the anti-Japanese and the Civil Wars; in peacetime, the army largely followed the trends in the civilian arts world as the Party dictated them. The People’s Liberation Army increasingly was employed to

\textsuperscript{63} Chiu and Sheng, \textit{Art and China’s Revolution}, 33.
\textsuperscript{64} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{65} Xing, \textit{Rhetoric of the Chinese Cultural Revolution}, 57.
\textsuperscript{66} Mittler, \textit{A Continuous Revolution}, 70.
\textsuperscript{67} Xing, \textit{Rhetoric of the Chinese Cultural Revolution}, 59.
bolster the personality cult around Mao, and thus to produce art that would contribute to the construction of Mao’s god-like image.\textsuperscript{68} Prior to the compilation of the \textit{Quotations from Chairman Mao} — or the “Little Red Book” — Mao supporters in the Army had turned the People’s Liberation Army into “a great school of Mao Zedong Thought”: an organization that functioned along the ideological and political lines as Mao desired.\textsuperscript{69} The army was the driving force behind the campaign to Study Mao’s \textit{Quotations}. In the 1960s, the people of China affirmed the \textit{Quotations} as being able to create miracles.\textsuperscript{70} The Little Red Book “supplied the breath of life to soldiers gasping in the thin air of the Tibetan plateau; enabled workers to raise the sinking city of Shanghai three-quarters of an inch; inspired a million people to subdue a tidal wave in 1969.”\textsuperscript{71} The People’s Liberation Army supplied most of the models that corresponded most closely to Mao’s ideas about ideological correctness. In the 1960s, the number of such soldier-models increased. The best known of them was Lei Feng. His great desire in life was to be nothing more than “a revolutionary screw that never rusts.” As a “little screw,” Lei Feng performed many good deeds – he sent his meager savings to the parents of a fellow soldier who had been hit by a flood, he served tea and food to officers and recruits, he gave whole heartedly in order to show his dedication to the revolutionary cause.\textsuperscript{72} He did not however commit any great deeds by which he is remembered, but taught the people how to be happy with what they had, to obey the Party and to let the Central Committee and Mao himself, do their thinking for them. Lei was killed in an accident with his Army truck on the 15\textsuperscript{th} of August, 1962. Until today, a debate continues whether Lei was a fictional character.\textsuperscript{73} Although Lei could be termed a “nobody,” he left behind a diary that became an object of national study. His diary was printed and reprinted, “photographs of Lei in action all of a sudden turned up, movies were made

\textsuperscript{68} Chiu and Sheng, \textit{Art and China’s Revolution}, 42.  
\textsuperscript{69} Chiu and Sheng, \textit{Art and China’s Revolution}, 42. 
\textsuperscript{70} Heisey, \textit{Chinese Perspectives in Rhetoric and Communication}, 20.  
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid, 21.  
\textsuperscript{72} Xing, \textit{Rhetoric of the Chinese Cultural Revolution}, 64. 
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid, 65.
about his life, stills from these movies were turned into comic strips; posters bearing his image were produced in staggering quantities [Figure 7]. Historian Chiang-tai Hung states, “It has always been something of a miracle that such an unprepossessing person could have made such an impact and could have so many pictures and written materials – even before he died.”

Mao’s attempt to regain power is one of the causes of the Cultural Revolution. Despite the name, the movement itself had little to do with culture: it was the climax in the power struggle between Mao and the Party. From 1966 this movement, which was led by Mao, gained momentum, and increasingly caused chaos and dislocation in the nation. The “Little Red Book” was distributed in millions of copies; the Mao-quotes were studied, chanted and sung. The first “big character posters” were pasted on walls, in which “anti-Party” sentiments, real or perceived enemies of Mao were visually attacked. Intellectuals, leaders, and artists were persecuted, and schools and universities were closed to give students the opportunity to follow Mao’s calls for continuous revolution by becoming Red Guards.

Waves of criticism engulfed the country, and practically every official was accused, by the summer of 1966 Mao was back in power and the moderate policies were turned back. From that moment on, the number of Red Guard Organizations, in which students and other youngsters organized themselves, exploded. Waving their copies of the Little Red Book, they travelled all over the country to preach revolution and were the main iconography of posters from this time [Figure 8]. The Party and state organizations practically ceased to function. Among the various Red Guard groups a struggle erupted over the question “who was truly a follower of Mao?” in the years 1967-1969, this struggle escalated into a veritable civil war. Though none of this is depicted in the propaganda posters of the time. By 1969, the Cultural Revolution was officially

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74 Landsberger, Chinese Propaganda, 28.
75 Chang-tai Hung, Mao’s New World, 30.
76 Crushing and Tompkins, Chinese Posters, 45.
77 Crushing and Ann Tompkins, Chinese Posters, 45.
78 Ibid, 46.
declared to have ended. In reality, Mao’s wife and her supporters took over power. They organized a number of radical mass movements in order to bolster their control over society.\textsuperscript{79}

In the years leading up to the Cultural Revolution, the Army dictated the guidelines for art: it should unite and educate the people, inspire the struggle of revolutionary people and eliminate the bourgeoisie.\textsuperscript{80} Art had to be revolutionized and guided by Mao Zedong Thought, its contents had to be militant and to reflect real life. By 1964, most of the paintings, New Year prints and woodcuts featured lots of red paint, army heroes (Lei Feng), Mao, and his thoughts [Figure 9]. Proletarian ideology, communist morale and spirit, revolutionary heroism were the messages of a new type of hyper-realistic, politicized art. In his famous talk at the Yenan Forum, Mao gave the following statement on the role of art:

\begin{quote}
The purpose of our meeting today is precisely to ensure that literature and art fit well into the whole revolutionary machines as a component part, that they operate as powerful weapons for uniting and educating the people and for attacking and destroying the enemy, and that they help the people fight the enemy with one heart and one mind. […] It means that the thoughts and feelings of our writers and artists should be fused with those of the masses of workers, peasants, and soldiers. […] With us literature and art are for the people. The revolutionary struggle on the ideological and artistic fronts must be subordinate to the political struggle because only through politics can the needs of the class and the masses find expression in concentrated form.\textsuperscript{81}
\end{quote}

Immediately propaganda posters infused their iconography with Mao’s political rhetoric. The most talented artists were employed to visualize the political slogans found within the Little Red Book. Many of them had worked on the commercial calendars that had been popular before the People’s Republic was founded.\textsuperscript{82} These artists were quickly co-opted and incorporated in the various governmental and party organizations that were set up to produce propaganda posters.\textsuperscript{83} The images

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  \item \textsuperscript{79} Heisey, \textit{Chinese Perspectives in Rhetoric and Communication}, 56.
  \item \textsuperscript{81} Mao Tse-Tung, “Talks at the Yenan Forum on Literature and Art,” (Peking: Foreign Language Press, 1965), 3-27.
  \item \textsuperscript{82} Crushing and Tompkins, \textit{Chinese Posters}, 67.
  \item \textsuperscript{83} Crushing and Tompkins, \textit{Chinese Posters}, 68.
\end{itemize}
they made were often figurative and realistic, almost as if photographs had been directly copied. Their aim was to portray the future in the present, not only showing “life as it really is,” but also “life as it ought to be.” They were painted in a semi-realistic style, with all forms outlined in black, filled in with pastel pinks, reds, yellows, greens, and blues [Figure 10].

VI. Rhetoric of the Cultural Revolution

Mao’s wife, Jiang Qing, became the ultimate artistic arbiter during the Cultural Revolution. The conceptual and theatrical conventions provided by a number of model operas and ballets that she supported became the standards in the visual arts. These operas and ballets included The Red Lantern, The Red Detachment of Women, and the White-Haired Girl. After they were staged in Peking in May 1967, they became artistic models. Pictures from these performances were in turn reproduced as posters. She formulated the principal of the “three prominences” which should not only apply to the stage, but should be used in painting as well: stress positive characters; stress the heroic in them, stress the central character of the main characters. Thus, the subjects were portrayed realistically and employing stage techniques, were always in the center of the action [Figure11].

The visual arts were employed to communicate the correct ideological standpoint and corresponding behavior. Only a narrow range of subjects was considered ideologically safe, and art became politicized and stereotyped to the extreme. It was the first time that propaganda art became the most favored vehicle for the transmission of party ideology; in those days, the propaganda artists themselves were held in the highest esteem. Original works of art were reproduced in journals and magazines. These original works of art were reproduced in journals and magazines, and then reprinted as large or small format posters, and sometimes turned into postage stamps. The large posters could be seen on the streets, in railway stations, and in other public spheres, while the smaller ones were distributed

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84 Ibid.
85 Heisey, Chinese Perspectives in Rhetoric and Communication, 63.
86 Heisey, Chinese Perspectives in Rhetoric and Communication, 63.
87 Landsberger, Chinese Propaganda, 40.
through the network of Xinhua bookshops for mass consumption. Given the frequent changes in what was deemed correct, these political posters came to be more carefully studied than newspapers for spotting the subtle change in tone, ideology, and slogans.\textsuperscript{88}

Not all were equally susceptible to the bombardment of visual propaganda that was central to the Cultural Revolution. Members of a Swiss delegation visiting China in the early 1970s were mystified by the heroic portrayal of the subjects in propaganda art and wondered about the usefulness of the portrayal of the heroes in which, in their opinion, no Chinese could recognize him or herself.\textsuperscript{89} And although the artists, through study of the concrete conditions in factories and rural areas, did their best to make their works as realistic as possible, it often happened that workers and peasants secretly criticized them. They usually did not agree with the way in which machinery, workshop conditions, or other activities that were portrayed. As in the Soviet posters of the 1930s, the hyper-realistic representations of ageless, larger-than life peasants, soldiers, workers and educated youth in dynamic poses functioned as abstractions and dominated all artist expression as ideal types [Figure 12].\textsuperscript{90} The heroic figures were usually boldly outlined, while the coloring tended to be varied and cheerful, a style that combines Chinese ink outline and Western color shading.\textsuperscript{91} The strong and healthy bodies of the people shown in the posters functioned as metaphors for the strong and healthy productive classes the state wanted to propagate. In the process, gender distinctions of the subjects were by and large erased over time.\textsuperscript{92} The physical differences between males and females practically disappeared – a distinction that was also attempted in real life. Men and women alike had stereotypical “masculinized” bodies. Their clothes were baggy and non-gender specific, the only colors available being cadre gray, army green or worker and peasant blue. Their faces, including

\textsuperscript{88} Landsberger, \textit{Chinese Propaganda}, 41.
\textsuperscript{89} Xing, \textit{Rhetoric of the Chinese Cultural Revolution}, 70.
\textsuperscript{90} Bonnell, \textit{Iconography of Power}, 13.
\textsuperscript{91} Xing, \textit{Rhetoric of the Chinese Cultural Revolution}, 70.
\textsuperscript{92} Xing, \textit{Rhetoric of the Chinese Cultural Revolution}, 71.
short-cropped hairdos and chopped-off pigtails, were done according to a limited repertoire of acceptable standard forms.\(^\text{93}\)

Content-wise, the figure of Mao Zedong, as the Great Teacher, the Great Leader, the Great Helmsman, the Supreme Commander, his revolutionary role and his thought, dominated the propaganda art of the first half of the Cultural Revolution, often to the exclusion of other subject matter.\(^\text{94}\) Mao had already appeared prominently on propaganda posters dating back to the 1940s, despite his “warnings against a personality cult.” The intensity of his portrayal in the second half of the 1960s however, was unparalleled.\(^\text{95}\) Mao was visually everywhere, his official portrait even hung in every home, often occupying the central place on the family altar. Adding to the already god-like stature of Mao as it was visualized in propaganda posters [Figure 13]. Mao then, seemed to be the only permissible subject of the era, the only model of displaying behavior that could be emulated. He could be depicted as a benevolent father, bringing the Confucian mechanisms of obedience into play. Or he was portrayed as a wise statesman, an astute military leader or a great teacher. His image was considered more important that the occasion for which the propaganda poster was designed: in a number of cases, identical posters were published in different years bearing different slogans and propaganda causes.\(^\text{96}\) No matter how he was depicted, he had to be painted *hong, guang, liang*: “no gray was allowed for shading, and the use of black was often interpreted as an indication of an artist’s counter-revolutionary intentions.”\(^\text{97}\) As the ultimate model, every detail of his representation has to be preconceived along ideological lines and invested with symbolic meaning. The artist Liu Chunhua who made the painting *Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan* explained the principals:

We placed Chairman Mao in the forefront of the painting, advancing towards us like a rising sun bringing hope to the people. Every line of the Chairman’s figure embodies the great

\(^{93}\) Landsberger, *Chinese Propaganda*, 28.
\(^{94}\) Heisey, *Chinese Perspectives in Rhetoric and Communication*, 89.
\(^{95}\) Ibid.
\(^{96}\) Landsberger, *Chinese Propaganda*, 57.
\(^{97}\) Ibid.
though of Mao Zedong and in portraying his journey we strove to give significance to every small detail. His head held high in the act of surveying the scene before him conveys his revolutionary spirit, dauntless before danger and violence and courageous in the struggle and in ‘daring to win’, his clenched fist depicts his revolutionary will, scorning all sacrifice, his determination to surmount every difficulty to emancipate China and mankind and it shows his confidence in victory. With the arrival of our Great Leader, blue skies appear over Anyuan. The hills, sky, trees, and clouds are the means used artistically to evoke a grand image of the red sun in our hearts. Riotous clouds are drifting swiftly past. They indicate that Chairman Mao is arriving in Anyuan at a critical point of sharp class struggle and show, in contrast how tranquil, confident, and firm Chairman Mao is at that moment.58

It is estimated that more than nine hundred million copies of this particular painting were eventually printed; it was displayed at meetings and carried around during demonstrations, mass meetings and processions, and many found their way onto walls next to the official portrait of the Chairman [Figure 14]. It is estimated that during the Cultural Revolution, 2.2 billion of the official Mao portraits were printed, which is equal to three posters for every person in the nation.99 Not having a portrait of Mao on display in the home indicated an apparent unwillingness to go with the revolutionary flow of the moment, or even a counter-revolutionary outlook, and refuted the central role Mao played not only in politics, but also in the day-to-day affairs of the people. Not only was the man himself made into a divine being; “his portrait had to be treated with special care, as if it contained the divinity himself. Nothing could be placed above it, and its frame should not have a single blemish.”100

Yet, despite the apparent distance between “Leader and led,” there was something in the images featuring Mao that struck a chord with the people, whether he inspected fields, shook hands with the peasants, sat down with them, whether he inspected factories, joked with the workers, whether he was dressed in military uniform, discussing strategy with military leaders, or mingled with contingents of Red Guards; whether he stood on the bow of a ship, whether he headed a column of

99 Heisey, Chinese Perspectives in Rhetoric and Communication, 92.
100 Landsberger, Chinese Propaganda, 131.
representatives of the national minorities, or received a delegation of foreign visitors, even when he floated above a sea of red flags [Figure 15].

In the early 1970s, the extreme and religious presence of Mao receded. In propaganda posters, proxies such as Lei Feng and Chen Yonggui often replaced Mao himself, and his dominant position was taken over by the embodiments of his thought. This did not diminish the adulation of Mao, who continued to lead the Chinese Communist Party as it was being rebuilt. The excesses committed by the people during the highpoint of the Cultural Revolution in the late 1960s were safely attributed to the people scheming against Mao. The army, formerly the “great school of Mao Zedong Thought,” no longer functioned as a model for the people. Instead, the “fine work style” of the Chinese Communist Party and the masses were what the army needed to learn from. The posters that did not feature Mao were devoted almost exclusively to idealized visualizations of life. They dealt with the “new things” that were seen as the victories of the Cultural Revolution. They featured heroic images of workers, peasants and soldiers waving Little Red Books and cheering on whatever mass movement was taking place. Although large numbers of posters were produced that were situated in factories and were dedicated to the struggle for increased industrial production, indicating that this production was taking giant leaps forward, what seemed to predominate the material depictions of propaganda posters were scenes of the countryside. These prints, seen through an idealized, urban lens, generally showed the success of mechanized agriculture and water conservancy, groups of peasants engaged in harvesting crops, or simply enjoying their improved lives [Figure 16].

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101 Ibid.
102 Chang-tai Hung, Mao’s New World, 58.
103 Ibid.
104 Min and Wolf, Chinese Propaganda Posters, 66.
105 Ibid.
The styles and themes that had been instrumental in propagating the image of Mao and in creating the cultural impression of China, continued to dominate Chinese propaganda art well beyond Mao’s death in 1976 and the official end of the Cultural Revolution. Hua Guofeng became Mao’s handpicked successor. Hua was a relative outsider, and not well versed in the palace intrigues and power politics of the Party. To improve his standing, he tried to take over Mao’s political legacy by uncritically adopting most of his polices, by stating, “We firmly uphold whatever policy decisions Chairman Mao made and we unswervingly adhere to whatever instructions Chairman Mao gave.” Hua understandably needed the artistic idiom that previously had been centered on Mao to bolster his own claims to power. Under his leadership, he had posters made that showed him in identical situations and locations as where the Great Helmsman had been immortalized. Various pantings were made and reprinted which featured Mao, including those that depicted Mao handing over his testament to Hua. In other cases, Hua took over the position in works of art reserved solely for Mao in order to support his legitimacy as the Mao’s successor. Despite the indications that Mao’s policies would continue in all fields, Hua’s term of office witnessed the beginnings of a massive rehabilitation of all the artists and intellectuals who had been prosecuted during the “ten years of chaos” of the Cultural Revolution.

VII. Post-Mao Iconography and the Reform Era

Within a few years, Deng Xiaoping replaced Hua. Under Deng’s leadership, the economic rehabilitation of China progressed and completed the shift away from propaganda posters. Deng quickly shifted away from the stylistic rhetoric of Socialist Realism, providing opportunity for alternative modes of visual representation. A process facilitated by the new “openness” of Chinese

\[106\] Crushing and Tompkins, Chinese Posters, 98.
\[107\] Landsberger, Chinese Propaganda, 135.
\[108\] Ibid.
\[109\] Landsberger, Chinese Propaganda, 135.
society that became one of the major hallmarks of the reform period in the 1980s. Propaganda themes became less centralized on heroic and militant iconography and become stylistically more impressionistic, while bold colors were replaced with more subdued tones. Likewise, the slogans employed were less strident and militaristic, and more normative in content; the people were no longer called upon to struggle against enemies or nature, but instead were urged to adopt more cultured, hygienic, and educated lifestyles [Figure 17]. Abstract images replaced realism; explicit political contents were replaced by an emphasis on economic construction, or even by ordinary commercial advertisements. Design and representational techniques borrowed from Western advertising were frequently employed. Although these changes in style may have made the images less accessible to the “more backward sections of the population,” they greatly invigorated the overall product.

The themes of the posters that the government continued to publish can best be termed as glimpses of “living the good life in a material world.” All this was a far cry from the propaganda of the previous decades. These developments led to the disappearance of visual propaganda from the streets and state bookstores. With a rich choice of truly desirable paintings and posters available, nobody was interested in buying the political messages. A further blow to the use of propaganda posters was caused by municipal regulations, according to which the posting of posters was forbidden because it contravened environmental legislation. Posters continued to be produced, but in ever decreasing numbers. In the reform era, propaganda posters started to pay attention to the propagation of “wholesome,” individual spare-time activities. The improvement in living conditions was reflected in the greater diversity in clothing, both in material, design, cut, and color,

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110 Heisey, Chinese Perspectives in Rhetoric and Communication, 98.
111 Justice, China's Design Revolution, 63.
112 Ibid.
113 Chang-tai Hung, Mao’s New World, 79.
114 Heisey, Chinese Perspectives in Rhetoric and Communication, 100.
that people wear in the posters. Gone were the blue, gray, or black unisex “Mao-suits” that previously had vouched for the people’s proletarian outlook. More attention was paid to the details of the new affluence that manifested itself in Chinese society, in particular in the urban areas.\textsuperscript{115} The increased openness, the higher level of personal freedom that was allowed was translated into such visual icons as the jumbo jet, representing the new opportunities for travel, both within the country and aboard. The television set was seen as an embodiment of personal success in the new era. Owned by ever-growing numbers of people, it became a regular presence in many posters. Most importantly, people were shown enjoying themselves, and actually having fun [Figure 18].\textsuperscript{116} During this transition period, Chinese officials sought to incorporate symbols of modernity in order to convey the political and economic changes to the public. The inspiration for powerful images to portray these changes had to be sought outside of China.\textsuperscript{117} Once more, artists were allowed to look across borders, specifically to the West, for examples that could invigorate the arts. The images that were presumed to indicate development included space ships, mono-rails and other representations from science fiction. The spacecraft in particular seemed to be ascribed with modernizing qualities, while the use of “building imagery, high-rise buildings, and agricultural abundance was a clear reference to the new policies promising change and prosperity.”\textsuperscript{118} The symbolic use of science-fiction imagery and silhouettes of high-rise buildings merely functioned as a backdrop for the messages of economic development of 1980s posters. By using these visual elements in the sense of a far, but not unattainable future, by placing them behind and therefore outside of the central action itself, the posters conveyed a utopian quality [Figure 19]. In addition, changes in content representation further hinted at the improvement of living quality and life in China in the 1980s.

\textsuperscript{115} Landsberger, \textit{Chinese Propaganda}, 141.
\textsuperscript{116} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{117} Heisey, \textit{Chinese Perspectives in Rhetoric and Communication}, 103.
\textsuperscript{118} Heisey, \textit{Chinese Perspectives in Rhetoric and Communication}, 103.
More careful attention was paid to private space and the interior dwelling. Potted plants and flower vases returned to the Chinese living room and were no longer considered signs of bourgeois living. The greater freedom of movement resulting from the withdrawal of Chinese Communist Party control over the everyday life of the people and the increase in disposable income, led to an increase in the ownership of motorbikes, mopeds, and cars. These means of mobility largely replaced the bicycle and the tractor that were featured in earlier prints. Lastly, more attention was paid to consumption. Before, people were depicted while producing food; now they could be seen while actually consuming it. This not only applies to staple foods such as rice and fruits, but also to canned soda – a newly recurring theme.

A significant shift in the portrayal of power occurred during Deng Xiaoping’s leadership. Deng decided to do away with the leader worship as it had been practiced in the past. Deng rarely appeared on propaganda posters. This decision initially posed a problem for the visualization of political power, and therefore the Party itself. Non-personalized symbolism was found in the emblem of the state, the Chinese Communist Party’s logo of hammer and sickle; and the symbol of the nation [Figure 19]. However, political reality dictated that the image of Mao himself, as the founding father of the People’s Republic continue to be used.

Propaganda art during the 1990s and in the reform era have lost credibility and appeal, becoming increasingly considered as old fashioned. Yet, they continue to be produced for special events and minor political slogans. After the Tiananmen Incident of 1989, the leadership once more introduced propaganda posters featuring Lei Feng and other societal role models in an attempt to

119 Crushing and Tompkins, Chinese Posters, 112.
120 Ibid.
121 Heisey, Chinese Perspectives in Rhetoric and Communication, 104.
122 Landsberger, Chinese Propaganda, 150.
124 Scott, Poetics of the Poster, 23.
once more educate the people in the image desired by the Party.\textsuperscript{125} Though their impact and reception is minimal. The Party has not been able to provide appropriate propaganda for life in a society in the throes of modernization. The leadership continues to define the population’s wellbeing largely in terms of austerity, discipline, and obedience to Party-rule. However, this is contradicted by, and in conflict with the bombardment mass consumption taking place all over the world and in China.\textsuperscript{126}

\textbf{VIII. Conclusion}

In conclusion, the propaganda posters contained in the Anthony E. Clark Chinese poster collection represent well a pictorial genre that mirrors the turbulent political activity of the directives of the Communist Party’s central leadership during the height of the Mao Zedong personality cult. The commercial manufacture of these posters, often the sole decoration available for the public and private spheres, offers strong examples of the design style of this time. These remarkable and historically important posters are not only indicative of the propagandistic fervor of production, but the aesthetic changes initiated in the visual and performing arts during the Cultural Revolution as the state consciously manipulated style in an effort to create a “people’s” art that would inspire the Chinese people, to mobilize them and point them to a future Communist utopia.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[125] Landsberger, \textit{Chinese Propaganda}, 156.
\item[126] Landsberger, \textit{Chinese Propaganda}, 157.
\end{footnotes}
Bibliography


Whitworth University Library Special Collections: Anthony E. Clark Chinese Poster Collection. Special Collections. Whitworth University, Spokane WA.

Figure 2. Screenshot of Whitworth University Digital Commons, Anthony E. Clark Chinese Poster Collection.

Figure 5. *Man Holding His Hand as if to Reject Bribes*. Chinese propaganda poster, #8 in series. Color poster of man holding his hand as if to reject bribes. Translation: “Foster a healthy atmosphere, boycott unhealthy trends, resist corruption, and you will always be unstained.” c.1980s. Anthony E. Clark Chinese Poster Collection, 2016.

Figure 6. *Male and Female Workers with Seal of China in Background, #1 in Series*. Chinese propaganda poster. Color poster of male and female workers with seal of China in background. Translation: “Fervently love the country, fervently love the motherland, fervently love the party, and fervently love Socialism.” c.1980s. Anthony E. Clark Chinese Poster Collection, 2016.


Figure 11. Soldiers with Banners Behind Them. Chinese propaganda poster. Wood block of soldiers with banners behind them. Translation: “Shoulder to shoulder we go to battle. Fight hegemony; bring freedom and liberation; overthrow American imperialism.” c. 1960s. Anthony E. Clark Chinese Poster Collection, 2016.

Figure 13. *Chairman Mao Clapping Hands.* Chinese propaganda poster. Color photograph of Chairman Mao clapping hands. Translation: “Chairman Mao, we will always follow you forward!” c. 1960s. Anthony E. Clark Chinese Poster Collection, 2016.

Figure 14. *Chairman Mao goes to Anyuan.* Chinese propaganda poster. Replication of the oil painting by artist Liu Chunhua. c. 1960s.
Figure 15. *Chairman Mao at Party Meeting*. Color photograph of Chairman Mao at party meeting. Translation: “Chairman Mao and his fellow soldiers, Lin Biao, Vice Chairman, and comrade Zhou Enlai ascending the platform at the palace in Tiananmen.” C. 1960s. Anthony E. Clark Chinese Poster Collection, 2016.


Figure 18. Chinese propaganda poster. Color poster. c. 1980s.