

## Dreaming the Chinese Dream

*How the People's Republic of China Moved from Revolutionary Goals to Global Ambitions*

Stefan R. Landsberger

HCM 2 (3): 245–274

DOI: 10.1557/HCM2014.3.LAND

### Abstract

On 1 October 2014, the People's Republic of China (PRC) will observe the 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its founding which ended a decades' long period of oppression by imperialism, internal strife and (civil) war. Under the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), modernisation became the most important task. Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought guided the nation along this path that would lead to modernisation and the recognition of the new, strong China. As the first three decades passed, it became clear that ideological purity and revolutionary motivation did not lead to the realisation of the dream of rejuvenation. In late 1978, the Maoist revolutionary goals were replaced by the pragmatic policies that turned China into today's economic powerhouse. How has this radical turn from revolution to economic development been realised? How has it affected China's political, social and artistic cultures? Is China's present Dream structurally different from the one cherished in 1949?

**Keywords:** Chinese Dream, Maoism, modernisation, revolution, transformation

### Introduction

On 1 October 2014, the People's Republic of China (PRC) will observe the 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its founding. This event in 1949 marked the end of a decades' long period in which the nation saw itself oppressed by (Western) imperialism and ravaged by internal strife and (civil) war. These events had interrupted a search for, and the first steps towards the definition of a form of modernisation that would fit the Chinese circumstances. Under a provi-

sional government headed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the wholesale modernisation of the nation became a task of paramount importance. No aspect of political, social or cultural life was to be excluded from the endeavour to bring the nation's backwardness to an end and rid the country of the humiliating label of "Sick man of Asia". China's "century of humiliation" needed to be brought to a close and the nation's weaknesses, ranging from underdevelopment, backwardness and poverty, had to be transformed into strength. Initially, the developmental efforts were largely inspired by ideological factors. Marxism-Leninism, creatively applied to the concrete Chinese conditions in the form of Mao Zedong Thought, guided the nation along its path of development, sometimes in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds. And successful development would ultimately lead to modernisation and the recognition of the new, healthy and strong China. As the first three decades passed, however, it became increasingly clear that the strict focus on ideological purity and revolutionary motivation did not necessarily lead to the realisation of the long-held ambition of modernising China, of making the nation rich and strong again. In order to accomplish the Chinese dream of rejuvenation, a more pragmatic approach to development was called for. Some thirty-five years ago, the strict earlier focus on revolutionary goals that marked the Maoist years was traded in for a more pragmatic set of policies aimed at economic modernisation that have eventually turned China into the economic powerhouse and potential political key player it is today.

In the following, I will chronologically trace this shift from revolution to reform that has turned China from a cradle of revolution to the world's potentially biggest economy. How has this radical turn from a focus on revolution to an obsession with economic development been realised? What have been the effects of this turn on the political, social and artistic cultures that emerged in China after 1949? Is China's present dream structurally different from the one that was cherished in 1949?

## People's China

The challenges confronting the new government in 1949 were daunting, and all-encompassing. The economy was in a shambles, the nation was ravaged by decades of endless (civil) wars and skirmishes, the people were exhausted. And yet, the very nature of the political organisation that established the PRC was one that had inspired many to support it. Although ostensibly Communist (or Marxist-Leninist, with an ever larger

dose of Maoism added), the CCP was first and foremost a *nationalist* party. Its popularity to a large extent was due to the fact that it had been most successful in adapting an anti-foreign, in particular an anti-Japanese, position rather than because of its ideological orientation. Added to the tales of heroism and egalitarianism that had started circulating in popular discourse ever since the end of the Long March (1934-1935), the CCP had emerged for many Chinese as the only viable political alternative to the Nationalist Party (Kuomintang, or Guomindang, KMT/GMD) that was ultimately vanquished during the Civil War (1946-1949). Shortly before announcing the establishment of the new government on 1 October 1949, Mao had convincingly established the CCP's nationalist credentials when he wrote that due to its leadership, "the Chinese people had stood up",<sup>1</sup> that the "century of humiliation" at the hands of others had ended and that the New China would no longer tolerate any outside subjugation or interference. These remarks would continue to serve as clarion calls.

The establishment of the PRC marked a new stage in the process of modernisation that China had been forced to embark on since the middle of the preceding century as a result of the encroaching Western powers. This process, as well as the interpretations of the concept of modernity that propelled it, had oscillated between calls for either complete Westernisation or for Sinicisation of Western (i.e. "modern") influences and practices while preserving the Chinese tradition. In fact, in the final days of the Qing dynasty, modernisation as such was considered the same as Westernisation.<sup>2</sup> With the victory of the CCP in 1949, socialist modernisation (mainly informed by Marxism-Leninism as the nation's foundational ideology, albeit in the *Chinese* interpretation that Mao Zedong had formulated during the Yan'an years) took off, opposing Western imperialist domination and exploitation, considering them obstacles to economic and political modernisation.<sup>3</sup> Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought allowed for a complete repudiation of the past, thus fully realising the ambitions of the May Fourth Movement activism out of which the CCP was born. On a more practical level, the Soviet Union served as a blueprint for the direction Chinese socialist modernisation should take. The Soviet models of industrialisation, governance and bureaucracy, aesthetics, science and research, education, etc. seemed ready-made examples for the former agricultural, autocratically-ruled empire to emulate in its quest for modernity.

Although the reconstruction of the nation and the economy were paramount and most urgent concerns, the CCP was faced with what was possibly an even more cumbersome task: in Christos Lynteris' words, "[I]n order not only to reign but also to rule the Communists had to conquer

China not just militarily but politically too".<sup>4</sup> In short, the CCP had to convince the population that its approach to the nation's problems was the correct one, i.e. that establishing socialism was the solution.<sup>5</sup> A more contemporary method of analysis would consider this task as one of distinguishing and then applying the tools needed to govern or discipline the state's subjects.<sup>6</sup> Having spent more than a decade underground in largely rural liberated revolutionary base areas, successfully experimenting with peasant mobilisation, rural reform and redistribution of land,<sup>7</sup> the Party now ruled over (almost<sup>8</sup>) all of China and was in need of reformulating its policies and programmes. The relatively affluent and more urbanised provinces along the Eastern seaboard were among the last to come under CCP rule. And while China's urbanites had often suffered more, and more directly, under imperialist and Japanese suppression than the rural population, their expectations and aspirations for the future were essentially different. The CCP in effect was forced to redefine itself, to morph from an organisation predominantly occupied with rural affairs to a ruling party concerned about the whole population; in this process of self-reinvention, the Party showed itself to be more urban-oriented than it had made itself out to be before.



Figure 1 *Tugai wancheng nongmin shenghuo hao* (The life of the peasants is good after Land Reform) 土改完成农民生活好

(designer: Jin Meisheng 金梅生) (published by Huamei huapian chubanshe 华美画片出版社, ca. 1951, Stefan R. Landsberger Collection)

An almost continuous stream of mass movements addressing national, international, political, moral and social topics marked the first three decades of the PRC. This “flow of campaigns”,<sup>9</sup> organised both at the national and the local levels, both in the rural and urban areas, was intended as a comprehensive approach to modernisation: it aimed to strengthen the support for the CCP, to deepen the understanding of the new ideology that guided China, and to promote unity and economic production. The earliest campaigns included Land Reform, the War to Resist America and Aid Korea, the Movement to Suppress Counter-revolutionaries, the new Marriage Law, the Increase Production and Practice Economy Movement, the Patriotic Public Health Campaign, and the Preserve World Peace Movement; these would later be followed by the more comprehensive, multi-faceted complexes of campaigns such as the ones associated with the Great Leap Forward (1958-1960) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). The goals for most of these movements were comparatively easy to understand, while others made use of often convoluted or cryptic metaphors and symbols. The flow of campaigns unleashed from late 1949 onwards actually succeeded in bringing about results that seem mutually exclusive. On the one hand, the scope of identifying and suppressing alleged and real enemies of the state was expanded to ever increasing numbers of people, including more and more social groups, while at the same time the fear and paranoia engendered by these campaigns created ever deeper feelings of solidarity among those from non-suppressed social strata. It would be too facile to say that just belonging to the strata of workers or peasants would protect people from prosecution; even these members of the proletarian classes ran the risk of falling foul of ideological orthodoxy.

## Mass Culture

The instrument of the mass campaign had been honed to perfection during the years the CCP had spent underground in Yan’an (1935-1947) and all aspects of culture played a crucial role in them. In the countryside, the CCP had learned to comprehensively control the ideological agenda via public communication and entertainment media by using traditional means of communication to broadcast its objectives (for example through brightly coloured, largely non-verbal New Year prints; pamphlets; and newspaper editorials), or by adopting methods that had been developed for these purposes in the Soviet Union (for example propaganda plays,

skits, songs and wall newspapers).<sup>10</sup> Traditionally, the State should decide what people should know and do: thought and characteristic modes of everyday life should be made thoroughly predictable; even though ruling over only a small part of the nation at the time, the CCP automatically assumed that authority. The use of political language employing standardised rhetoric,<sup>11</sup> the presentation of models, whether in the printed or broadcast media, in art or in literature; a wide variety of tools and methods were used to ensure thought reform (and thereby behavioural change).<sup>12</sup> In the name of protecting the people against ideological lapses and in order to supply unequivocal behavioural demands, the CCP's autocratic, paternalistic management of culture, expressed in the need for constant evaluation and correction of cultural producers and intellectuals in general, was justified.<sup>13</sup> The control over culture, in turn, was informed by the sentiments that had been expressed in Mao's "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art" in 1942. These remarks would function as the basic literary and art policy for decades to follow.<sup>14</sup>

Although specifically talking about literature and art, Mao's ideas about the use of culture in the political socialisation of the population were clear: culture had to "become a component part of the whole revolutionary machinery, so [it] can act as a powerful weapon in uniting and educating the people while attacking and annihilating the enemy, and help the people achieve solidarity in their struggle against the enemy".<sup>15</sup> But not all culture could be used unquestioningly: Mao rejected the notion of art for art's sake as bourgeois, as well as the notions that art could be classless or independent of politics. Instead, he advocated that the "rich, lively language of the masses" was used as much as possible. The cultural forms that had been popular among urbanites or the "bourgeoisie" in the cities were rejected totally precisely because they were popular among the wrong social layers in the wrong part of the country. Culture had to serve politics, as Mao summed up: "What we demand is 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".<sup>16</sup>

The creation of this mass culture ran into problems after 1949: the Party was forced to look for a new tone, a fresh voice to spread its intentions and messages as it consolidated its powers. The cultural themes that had been so popular and effective in the countryside, including the use of woodcuts, simple plays and rural songs, were not suited for popularising the themes of construction and industrialisation that headed the agenda now. The CCP set out to learn a method to find support for its goals and demands that would appeal more to the sophisticated tastes of Chinese city-dwell-



ers.<sup>17</sup> It was agreed that for maximum effectiveness, a fusion of the technical and visual advances of the pre-war Shanghai Style that had been popular in China's cities; and the ideological correctness of the Yan'an style was called for.<sup>18</sup> To find this fusion, Soviet cultural methods and their implementation were studied to make use of the two decades of experience gained in the Soviet Union in visualising the post-revolutionary phase of construction. It was decided that Chinese culture would be constructed following the principles of Socialist Realism, the dominant aesthetic style in the Soviet Union since the 1930s.<sup>19</sup> Thus, not only the largest percentage of the Chinese people would be reached and reformed in an appropriate manner, China's aims of showing itself as having shaken off its image of the "Sick man of Asia" would be visualised using a modern, socialist aesthetic.

Socialist Realism became the accepted manner of representing the modern present and future. It depicted "life" truthfully and in its "revolutionary development", not merely as an objective reality but as a form of faction, of fictionalised reality. It provided a realistic view of life, represented in the rosy colours of optimism and frequently seen through an urban lens. Socialist Realism focused on industrial plants, blast furnaces, power stations, construction sites and people at work; and, less frequently, on happy peasants bringing in bumper harvests of grain, cotton and vegetables; this assorted catalogue of success and abundance stressed the importance of the economic and industrial development of the country. All this corresponded well with the policy that art should serve politics: if reality did not show the relevance of a policy (yet), its artistic (re)creation would. Moreover, the bright colours and the happy and prosperous atmosphere so characteristic of Socialist Realism were seen as a continuation of the essential features of traditional popular culture.<sup>20</sup>

In the period 1949-1957, writers, poets and dramatists studied Soviet literary examples. Many Chinese painters studied Socialist Realism in Soviet art academies; others were educated by Soviet professors who came to teach in Chinese institutions.<sup>21</sup> Some of the artists who in pre-Liberation days had been employed by commercial advertising agencies and had excelled in the Shanghai Style also tried their hands at this new mode of expression. They were given the opportunity – or in some cases were 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. As a 1959 retrospective stated, Socialist Realism "enabled Chinese artists to grasp the world of reality and to cure the indifference to nature which caused the decay of Chinese tradi-



*Figure 2 Women wei canjia  
goujia gongyehua jianshe er  
zihao (We are proud to  
participate in the founding of our  
country's industrialisation)*

我们为参加国家工业化建设  
而自豪

*(designer: Ning Hao, published by  
Huadong renmin meishu chubanshe,  
Shanghai 华东人民美术出版社, 1954,  
Collection International Institute of Social  
History)*



*Figure 3 Women hui baochi  
hongqide guangrong! (We will  
protect the honor of the red flag!)*

我们会保持红旗的光荣！

*(designer: Wu Dezu 武德祖, published  
by Renmin meishu chubanshe 人民美术  
出版社, 1953, Stefan R. Landsberger  
Collection)*



tional art”, while at the same time “it was the most popular form of art, which was also easiest to grasp”.<sup>22</sup>

## Golden Years

Once the CCP seemed to have found the correct tone to successfully address the largest possible section of the population, events seemed to take a positive turn. These early years seemed like a time of hope and support for the Party, even though it grappled with the question of “[...] how to foster rapid industrialisation in a traditional and backward society, and how to deal with the problem of scarcity (technology, resource, capital) while building a strong socialist society in the direction of achieving common prosperity”.<sup>23</sup> The cultural products of this period, ranging from films, stage plays, literary works and art work, were truly seen as reflections of the enthusiasm that existed among the population. Despite the numerous political campaigns organised to increase or consolidate popular support for various aspects of Communist rule, to combat corruption and bureaucracy, politics were not the most important subject. Judging by the cultural products created at the time, everybody seemed ready to join the enormous effort that was required to create a new socialist world in a country that had been devastated by decades of war and internal strife, and the popular culture reflected that desire. Elderly Chinese, not only Party leaders but also ordinary people, tend to talk about the “golden years” when thinking back to these days, although recent scholarship makes it abundantly clear that daily life was not so wonderful as many seem to (selectively) remember today.<sup>24</sup>

Productive behaviour was an aspect of activity that received ample attention in mass culture, as part of the educational and disciplining process that focused on responsibilities in building up a modern and advanced national industry. For various reasons, both logistical and psychological, urban areas became the privileged sites for widespread construction and massive industrialisation. Closely following the developmental blueprints borrowed from the Soviet Union, steel production served as one of the main yardsticks for industrial development, and aspects of the former were consequently featured in revolutionary culture. Scenes from blast furnaces, with workers in protective clothing and goggles engaging in strenuous labour in front of blazing fires to produce the huge amount of steel that was needed for China’s construction appeared in films and magazines or were described in literary works. The necessity to produce more

than before, even if not explicitly stated in the accompanying slogans, was the obvious message. Blast furnaces, molten steel and scenes from the metallurgical industry in general, seemed to inspire cultural workers enormously, as can be seen from the numerous variations on this theme that appeared in the early 1950s.

The end product of all this industrial activity, steel, appeared in artistic renditions as well, by presenting workers who were engaged in the more visible manifestations of construction. Welders, both male and female, and workers in locomotive engine workshops proved excellent subjects for inspiring stories and images, testifying not only to the vitality of Chinese industry, but to the state of the art of its products and to the labour enthusiasm of its workers as well. Despite the stress on steel production and its applications, other activities related to modernising China were highlighted as well. Such tradesmen as construction workers, bricklayers and carpenters, in short, those people who were involved in changing the physical appearance of the Chinese cities, also were turned into subject matter. The messages these images presented were twofold: firstly, of course, they showed hard labour changing the face of the city and thus the nation, but secondly, they provided glimpses of what the new, modernised China would look like.

The unity of the labourer (usually male) and the peasant (often female, for obvious reasons: links with the soil, fertility, etc.) working together to lift China up served as a frequent trope in mass culture. The worker supplied the countryside with industrially produced agricultural tools, the peasant produced ever increasing quantities of produce to not only help industrialisation but also improve general living standards. By and large, in accordance with the policy that the agricultural surplus should be used to build up an industrial base, various mobilisational and organisational methods were employed to help the peasantry part more or less willingly with the fields it had acquired during Land Reform. Stories, films and images told inspirational and inspiring tales of how rural denizens had willingly entered ever larger levels of collectivisation, culminating in the People's Communes that became the hallmark of rural China by the late 1950s. At the same time, great attention was paid to the beneficial cultural effects of Party-rule in the rural areas in the form of electrification, the increase in healthcare facilities and the growing number of educational institutions.

## Getting organised

The authorities as a matter of course dictated when and where a person should work, when and where s/he would eat and when to wake and sleep.<sup>25</sup> The newly formed urban *danwei*, or work units, provided secondary provisions to the steadily growing urban workforce, including housing and access to scarce and/or subsidised goods. At the same time, the units functioned as a means to ensure ideological and behavioural conformity of its members. They were also set up to structure the lives of their members outside of the factory or workshop; whether this included unit-organised sports activities, political study sessions or excursions, *danwei*-members formed a tight-knit, artificially extended family that worked together and played together. As Ning Wang states, "Private life and leisure were no longer private affairs, but rather things that had to be censored and put under the control of the state".<sup>26</sup> In the countryside, the emerging rural collectives and People's Communes served similar organisational and controlling purposes, with two major distinctions: in many cases extended family relations were more naturally existent in the countryside, often functioning as a backbone for the collective entities that were superimposed on them; and the peasantry had no chance to claim any of the secondary benefits that urbanites were able to enjoy.

Nonetheless, conditions did seem to improve across the board, nationwide. The fact that the economic reconstruction of the nation received full attention after decades of warfare paid off; the comprehensive grasp of the CCP over the whole nation ensured a more successful implementation of political and social initiatives than had been possible before.<sup>27</sup> This led the leadership of Party, state and nation to erroneously assume that China could cast caution to the wind and leap forward. By tightening rules for intellectual and artistic liberties, by doing away with a planned approach to economic development, the nation embarked on an all-out effort to emulate and eventually surpass the most developed nations in the world at the time, i.e. America and England. This Great Leap Forward strategy, adopted in 1958, mobilised the whole population in a frenzy of activity; the flow of campaigns reached a climax hitherto unknown. Urban work units were mobilised into twenty-four-hour shifts and ordered to produce steel that was to be used in industry; rural cooperatives were merged into communes to create an economy of scale to once and for all solve the problem of food supplies. The militarisation of society was set in motion to ensure the realisation of the total mobilisation of society. Culture in the broadest sense of the term not only played a major

role in this process: art, literature, film, music, education had to unequivocally prepare the people to do what was expected of them and to whip up the enthusiasm of the masses; cultural producers, at the same time, were susceptible to the same unrealistic hyperbole and under the spell of the same feverish expectations they were supposed to inculcate in their audiences. Increasingly, Mao and the CCP became convinced that by merely relying on willpower, and by giving supremacy to the human, subjective dimensions of history, the people would be able to bring about a quick transformation of the concrete obstacles caused by lagging industrialisation and mechanisation they encountered in the physical world. This was the result of an exaggerated belief in the power of ideology on human consciousness.<sup>28</sup>

## High Expectations

It is obvious from the preceding that the realisation of the Chinese Dream as it was formulated in 1949 initially and primarily was a domestic, nationalist enterprise centred on curing the “Sick Man of Asia” by developing and modernising China; showing the world that the new regime had staying power and was able to live up to its promises were tantamount concerns. This is not to say that the outside world did not matter, or did not exist. On the contrary, events beyond its borders continually touched upon China and influenced its policies. The relations with the Soviet Union initially served as a reference point for the various modernisation schemes that were pursued. The Soviet Union, after all, was a nation that was considered to be similar in many respects: centuries of imperial rule had been replaced by a proletarian revolutionary government; an economy that was largely agricultural had succeeded to industrialise and thereby modernise. The path to modernisation and development of the Soviets thus could serve as an example for China in its own process of rehabilitation and reconstruction. The American fear of the global spread of communism in what was to become the Cold War moreover almost forced China into the arms of the Soviet Union and made its participation in what was soon called the Socialist Bloc seem like a logical step. At the same time, this lining up forced the PRC to enter the Korean conflict (1950-1953) at a time when its resources, manpower and energy could and would have been put to better use domestically. Moreover, it interfered with the plans to complete the liberation of all of Chinese territory, specifically Taiwan.



Figure 4 *Qinlüezhede xiachang* (*The fate of aggressors*) 侵略者的下场  
 (designer unknown, published by Dahua jinshuachang 达华金刷厂, 1952, private collection)

The Chinese Volunteers Army's military exploits in Korea, on the other hand, did work to the advantage of the Chinese regime. Its ability to defend its national territory against one of the victors of the Second World War and beat back the superiorly armed and equipped American troops contributed greatly to a sense of accomplishment and mirrored the successes attained in national reconstruction. This was surely not the behaviour of a Sick Man! It gave the people many occasions and reasons to be proud of and further bolstered the confidence of the CCP leadership, which eagerly exploited the opportunities the conflict offered to press for national unity. The many "martyrs" who died during the conflict, moreover, were used to present numerous convincing behavioural models for sacrifice.

The sense of accomplishment that the Chinese activities at home and abroad created contributed to the rash decisions to embark on the Great Leap. At the same time, this sense made Chinese leaders increasingly chafe at what they felt to be Soviet fetters. China wanted to be more than a mere part of the Socialist Bloc, it wanted to be recognised for its numerous own successes; it wanted to be seen as an alternative ideology of revolutionary liberation next to the one touted by the Soviet Union. China's increased assertiveness was increasingly displayed in the international arena. As one of the most vocal participants at the first Conference of Non-Aligned Nations in Bandung (Indonesia) in 1955, China managed to establish itself as a

promising and credible alternative to the oft heavy-handed approach of the Soviets. Having been a semi-colony itself at the mercy of the hands of the (Western) imperialist nations, it spoke the language of many of the newly independent states present at the Conference.

The new international assertiveness exhibited by China, and the growing desire to follow a path to modernisation and developments not dictated by the Soviet Union led to a split between the two that would henceforth divide the Socialist Bloc.<sup>29</sup> After an acrimonious parting that reached a climax in 1960, China effectively seemed isolated in the world: strategically blocked by America, left to its own devices by the Soviet Union and (most of) its allies in the socialist world, not yet wholeheartedly embraced by other countries, although viewed with a certain amount of sympathy by the non-aligned nations and various former Western colonies. The grand visions of emulating or even surpassing the developed world, as presented at the beginning of the Great Leap effort, moreover, backfired dramatically. Instead of a resounding success in all fields, the Great Leap turned into an utter disaster. Incompetent management of the movement at all levels, political self-promotion of cadres by callous and extortionist rule at the lower levels, failed harvests, general incompetence, wishful thinking, these and other factors all combined to create a famine of almost unknown proportions,<sup>30</sup> with the number of casualties currently estimated at some forty million people.

## Maoist China

The international isolation and economic downturn had a sobering effect on China's Party and political leadership. Mao could not but take most of the blame for the failures of the Great Leap that he himself had conceived of and set in motion. Others took over day-to-day responsibility in trying to sort things out. The number one priorities were to restore social and political order, reorganise food production and build up adequate supplies. To this end, a more relaxed policy was formulated by Deng Xiaoping and others that allowed for greater private initiative.<sup>31</sup> When looking closely at the measures adopted at the time, it is striking to discover how closely they resemble the modernisation and reform policy package that was initially adopted in 1978 and that started the developmental process that has turned China into the economic and political powerhouse it is today. This political relaxation – or ideological demobilisation – spread to all aspects of society and had an enormously liberating effect on culture.

Many if not most cultural producers had been implicated in creating





Figure 5 *Chengfeng polang gelei shentong* (*Brave the wind and the waves, everything has remarkable abilities*) 乘风破浪 各显神通

(designers: Wang Liuying, Xin Liliang, Wu Shaoyun, Jin Zhaofang, Meng Muyi, Yu Weibo, Xu Jiping, Lu Zezhi, Zhang Biwu 王柳影、忻礼良、吴少云、金肇芳、孟幕颐、俞微波、徐寄萍、陆泽之、张碧梧, publisher unknown, ca. 1958, private collection)

and sustaining the hysteria of the Great Leap. Instead of acknowledging complicity, many were able to hide behind, or were lulled asleep by the official interpretation of the Great Failure having come about as the result of natural disasters and Soviet betrayal. With the enormous pressure of turning China into a developed nation within fifteen years all but gone, most were able to pick up where they had left before being swept up in the general craziness. In a sense, the process of comprehensively and organically developing a new China that had started in 1949 could now be revived. No more leaps and bounds were called for, but cautious and sensible experimentation was what occupied all walks of life. As a result of the shift towards a more technocratic mode of governmentality,<sup>32</sup> mass movements were now seen as a waste of energy instead of as upsurges of creation and change, and limited as much as possible; shocks and surprises were avoided wherever one could. The CCP and the government as well as the policies they formulated and executed had to become dependable, trustworthy and predictable again; this applied to China as a national unit as well as it manoeuvred gingerly in the international arena in an attempt to find new allies.



Figure 6 *Juexinglede renmin, bi jiang dedao zuihoude shengli!* (*Awakened peoples, you will certainly attain the ultimate victory!*) 觉醒了的人民, 必将得到最后的胜利! (designer: Wen Bing 文兵, published by *Renmin meishu chubanshe* 人民美术出版社, 1963, Stefan R. Landsberger Collection)

While the nation undeniably was able to regain its footing after the famine and refocus on the wider aim of modernisation and development, groups within the political and Party elite considered the methods employed to bring this about as a betrayal of the revolution. After having been forced into the background and having moved out of the centre of power in the capital, Mao withdrew to Shanghai where he started to plot on ways to retake the initiative and force his imprint on politics again. In a period of some five years, Mao was able to assemble a coterie of likeminded, trusted and more ideologically driven (career) politicians and cadres there that set out to devise strategies for his return to power. Their efforts to reinstate Mao were undertaken in all possible fields, but it was the cultural realm in which they were particularly influential and powerful. In politics, an ideological education campaign was started in the countryside to more or less inoculate the peasantry against the temptations of capitalism that Mao saw emerging as a result of the link between effort and remuneration.<sup>33</sup>

In the cultural field, voices rose from Shanghai that criticised the reactionary and exploitative nature of all art and culture and decried the fact that culture again had become a domain for the elite and failed to engage or satisfy the demands of the truly revolutionary classes. At the same time, a leader cult emerged centred around Mao that paled Stalin's. As I have

written elsewhere, Mao's countenance beamed down from the huge billboards located along the streets and avenues in China's urban areas. The people wore Mao badges in varying sizes. His portrait decorated steam engines and harbour cranes. Photographs showing his face were placed in the fields, where they oversaw most phases of rural production [...] He figured larger than life in the huge visual representations of a future Communist utopia. The quotations from his writings, containing political and ideological exhortations to behave and think in a specific way, were often compared to a magical or supernatural weapon, a "spiritual atom bomb" or even a "beacon light"; they therefore graced every imaginable surface. By being omnipresent, he not only watched over work and encouraged the people to work even harder to bring about the future he envisaged, he also provided blessings for all human activities.<sup>34</sup>

In the political field, Mao warned time and again for the transformation of the CCP into a new professional rather than revolutionary ruling elite.<sup>35</sup> As the tensions between the revolution and reform factions grew, a reckoning seemed unavoidable.

At the same time, Mao's leadership and the developments it inspired in China were very much presented as a *Chinese* version of modernity, as the synthesis of the best elements of Chinese and Western practices, "[...] an example of articulating the universal to the particular, or translating the global to the local, which called upon others to find their own paths by following a similar procedure".<sup>36</sup> As such, it was presented as a developmental blueprint for the less developed, non-aligned nations in the world that themselves were struggling to modernise and were unwilling to embrace either the American or the Soviet example.<sup>37</sup>

## Smashing, Burning and Looting

One of the battlefields where the struggle between the two lines grew most intense was among urban youngsters, in particular secondary school pupils and university students, in Beijing. Most of them hailed from elite families whose members played important roles in government and the bureaucracy, amassing power and privilege in the new socialist order.<sup>38</sup> Their backgrounds had helped them to enrol in the most prestigious institutions of learning. At the same time, these youngsters had become increasingly aware that the incessant calls for self-sacrifice and waging revolution that permeated revolutionary culture were impossible to follow in a society that was becoming more and more ossified and bureaucratized. In short, they



Figure 7 Yi Mao Zedong sixiang wei wuqi piban jiu shijie jianshe xin shijie (*Criticize the old world and build a new world with Mao Zedong Thought as a weapon*), 以毛泽东思想为武器批判旧世界建设新世界

(designer: Propaganda Poster Group from the Shanghai renmin meishu chubanshe 上海人民美术出版社宣传画组, published by Shanghai renmin meishu chubanshe 上海人民美术出版社, 1966, Stefan R. Landsberger Collection)

had become “docile tools”<sup>39</sup> rather than revolutionary martyrs. Rather than tracing back the roots of this state of affairs in the traditional ways of political behaviour that apparently still existed, they believed – or were led to believe by many of Mao’s radical supporters – that it was their parents’ sabotaging of Mao’s liberating ideology that blocked their opportunities to contribute actively to the revolution. Often donning the uniforms in which their parents had participated in the armed struggle that had brought the CCP to power,<sup>40</sup> these young people took to the streets, loudly demanding the ouster of “people in the party following the capitalist road”, the removal of remnants of the “old” China and the return of Mao as the leader of the nation. In the summer of 1966, revolutionary enthusiasm (as well as cruelty and irrationality) reached a fever pitch. Known as Red



Guards and often dressed in self-styled uniforms, these adolescents would shake up the political, social and cultural order as it existed at the time, engaging in “[...] the beating of school teachers, the burning of books, the smashing of temples, the raiding of households, or all of these at once”.<sup>41</sup> Not even respected politicians at the national level, such as Deng Xiaoping, were protected from public humiliation. They were sent away for re-education by the masses or driven to suicide. Many revolutionary veterans were “struggled against” or prosecuted and committed suicide. Famous writers and artists were hounded to death. Ordinary people were imprisoned on the basis of trumped up charges. In the guise of class struggle, many personal vendettas were fought out.



### 沿着毛主席的革命文艺路线胜利前进

*Figure 8 Yanzhe Mao zhuxide geming wenyi luxian shengli qianjin (Advance victoriously while following Chairman Mao's revolutionary line in literature and the arts) 沿着毛主席的革命文艺路线胜利前进*

*(designer: Central Academy of Industrial Arts collective work 中央工艺美术学院供稿, publisher unknown, 1968, Stefan R. Landsberger Collection)*

The Red Guards' anger and frustration turned against real or perceived enemies in the form of leaders, neighbours, store fronts, street signs, anything that was seen as supporting enemies of the new, austere, proletarian China and its leader Mao; the Guards opposed “old habits, old customs, old culture and old ideas” and engaged in the wholesale smashing, burning and looting of treasures, residences and ministries. Having returned to Peking to personally direct his Cultural Revolution, Mao and his supporters fanned the flames of youthful resentment when and wherever they could to support their case. Increasingly, however, the Guards turned against each other, accusing their perceived opponents of being ideologically impure and engaging in counterrevolutionary activities. In many cases, the children

of revolutionary cadres fought against the children of revolutionary workers and peasants. One's loyalty to Mao and faith in his ideas, conveniently condensed in the *Little Red Book*, a compendium of some 270 of his sayings,<sup>42</sup> became the ultimate yardsticks for truth. As the months progressed and Red Guards trekked all over China, the spectre of civil war loomed once more, as the fighting no longer was limited to urban areas but spread to the countryside as well. In some cities, for example south-eastern Guilin, pitched and armed battles were fought between groups of young revolutionaries all equally claiming to represent and defend Mao.<sup>43</sup>



Figure 9 *Chedi chuochuan Ulanfu fandang jituan* (Thoroughly expose Ulanfu's anti-Party clique) 彻底戳穿乌兰夫反党集团

(designer: Hohhot Revolutionary Rebel Liaison Headquarters Fine Arts Group 呼和浩特革命造反联络总部美术组, publisher unknown, ca. 1966, Stefan R. Landsberger Collection)

Although at the beginning of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution Mao was quite taken by the idea that this generation of youngsters waged their own revolution and was steeled in their own crucible of struggle, the situation in reality spun out of control. As a result of the order to transport the young revolutionaries all over the nation, free of charge, to wage their own revolution, the transport and supply system ground to a halt, with dire consequences for industrial production. Food-stuffs did not reach (urban) markets anymore, the “ordinary” people (*lao-*



*baixing*) became dissatisfied and it became more and more difficult to insist that reactionaries were responsible for this state of affairs. In the summer of 1968, Mao called a meeting of the main Red Guard leaders and expressed his dissatisfaction with their behaviour and their extreme inter-cine factionalism.<sup>44</sup> Not only did he withdraw his support at this occasion (meaning that his foot soldiers had served their purpose and were no longer needed), he effectively banished them as an organisation from the cities to the countryside, to learn from what he called the only real revolutionaries, the poor peasants.

### Agrarian Utopia

After this dramatic turn of events, the central concerns of the CCP leadership seemed to have shifted back to the countryside, away from the urban areas where the Party had been engaged in state building for some two decades: now the peasantry was again seen as the most reliable section of the population. Once the Red Guards followed Mao's orders and moved to the countryside, Mao himself withdrew from active politics and left the running of the day-to-day affairs to his radical followers, headed by his wife Jiang Qing. To all intents and purposes, the Cultural Revolution had ended; when the Ninth Party Congress convened in the spring of 1969, it officially declared that such was indeed the case. In reality, however, the struggle for power between proponents of revolution and those supporting economic development continued unabated.

The economic situation the nation found itself in did need renewed attention. The politicisation of society that had taken place during the initial phase of the movement, the endless mass meetings and the often destructive actions of the Red Guards had caused considerable harm to the economy, but the nation was not teetering on the brink of total breakdown; contrary to accepted wisdom, China's GDP during the ten years that the Cultural Revolution lasted actually grew on average by 7.1%.<sup>45</sup> On this relatively sound economic base, politics and culture turned away from the cities again in almost a reversal from what had happened after 1949; with the Red Guards all removed to the countryside and order seemingly returned to the urban areas, China seemed intent on becoming a revolutionary rural nation. Official publications, movies, art, novels and behavioural models now praised the innate revolutionary qualities of the poor and lower-middle peasants. These cultural products all are imbued with a rosy image of the great life in the countryside, something that later recol-

lections from people actually having been “sent down” there to live at the time certainly do not support.<sup>46</sup> In a way, the Chinese Dream that was presented in the early 1970s was nothing less than an agrarian Utopia, although it was conceived through a distinctly urban lens.<sup>47</sup>

In no other period of the PRC was the gap between the presented reality in the political and cultural spheres and the actual situation on the ground more tangible than during the second half of the Cultural Revolution. Daily life had become politicised, regimented and ritualised to the extreme, and this applied to culture in whatever form as well. The flow of political campaigns was revived, targeting ever more ordinary people and officials that had been well-liked or even revered; even Mao’s former “comrade-in-arms” and anointed successor Lin Biao all of sudden turned out to allegedly have been plotting a coup and became the object of a nationwide campaign of criticism in 1974. Behaviours, attitudes and ways of doing things were suddenly and mostly inexplicably criticised as counter-revolutionary. To many Chinese, it seemed as if the gleaming and well-oiled machinery of the revolution that had inspired so many was getting bogged down, running out of steam; increasingly, the popular support for the revolutionary cause seemed to become superficial, or even evaporated altogether. The author Han Shaogong illustrates this well when writing, “The majority, who were not direct recipients of political persecution, also grew increasingly distant from and suspicious of the Cultural Revolution, because it interfered with their individual life desires. These people generally did not have a strong political consciousness and did not directly engage in political behaviour, yet they formed a widespread and powerful centrifugal force consisting of values, and this force pulled outward, away from the Cultural Revolution”.<sup>48</sup>

## Post-Mao China

The year 1976 would prove to be critical for the CCP and the PRC. Within a few months, many of the “founding fathers” of the revolution died; many of them were held in extremely high esteem and could boast of great popular support. With revolutionary veterans such as Zhou Enlai, Zhu De and others no longer present to try and let moderation prevail, many Chinese were fearful of what the future might bring. Mao’s own death, in September 1976, and the subsequent arrest of his widow Jiang Qing and her radical followers a month later, brought the Cultural Revolution effectively to an end. Looking back on the almost thirty years in which Mao attempted to

realise his nationalist agenda of making China rich and strong again and shedding its reputation of being a Sick Man, it is almost ironic that in the end precisely the culture and political and social practices that he had tried to eradicate as feudal and/or counterrevolutionary, would emerge victorious.

It would take some two more years before the effects of the Cultural Revolution had more or less been set to right. In this interregnum, Mao's appointed successor Hua Guofeng tried to keep the system intact as much as possible and to continue most of the policies of his predecessor. Lacking Mao's charisma, political acumen and ruling abilities, he was eased out of office once it became clear that he would set no structural changes in motion nor distance himself from Mao or the latter's policies. By now, in 2014, Hua seems almost forgotten, and the present leaders of the PRC try their utmost to turn him into a non-entity. But it was Hua Guofeng who "opened China's doors to the outside world", thereby creating the conditions that would make it possible for the nation to reclaim its position in the international arena. This far-reaching decision is now generally ascribed to Deng Xiaoping.

By late 1978, the victorious reformist faction now headed by Deng Xiaoping succeeded in convincing the CCP that only comprehensive policies of "reform and opening up" would help realise China's goals and ambitions. Under Deng and his supporters, new measures were adopted that seemed to do away with everything that had been believed in, supported, practiced and fought for in the preceding three decades; these measures have generally been characterised as pragmatic, as opposed to the more ideologically driven, voluntarist policies Mao proposed and had implemented. Many, including Deng himself, see these economic reform policies as the second (social/economic) Chinese revolution,<sup>49</sup> following the political revolution of 1949. The initial resistance from vested interests was fierce, but gradually it became clear that everybody would benefit, including China as a nation. This started the process that over the past three plus decades has turned China into the economic powerhouse, the workshop of the world that it is today.

Deng's reform strategy rekindled the debates about Sinicisation and Westernisation when it came to the conceptualisation of Chinese modernity. The widely felt revulsion against the events of the Cultural Revolution made a full embrace of complete Westernisation almost unavoidable, as many reformist intellectuals argued in the 1980s.<sup>50</sup> However, the sobering effects of the Tiananmen Massacre in 1989, and the disappointment many of these same reformist intellectuals felt about the lack of Western support



Figure 10 *Jianshe fuyu wenmingde shehui zhuyi xin nongcun* (Build a prosperous and cultured new socialist countryside) 建设富裕文明的社会主义新农村

(designer: Du Jiang 杜江, published by Sichuan meishu chubanshe 四川美术出版社, 1997, Stefan R. Landsberger Collection)

for the democratisation ideals of the student demonstrators have perversely made Sinicisation acceptable again.<sup>51</sup> As China has become an ever more important factor in global economic and political affairs, Westernisation is seen as an unavoidable outcome in an era where globalisation, and China's active participation in it, holds the key to realising the dreams of making the nation rich and strong again. Increasingly, however, many Chinese, both intellectuals, politicians and ordinary people, have grown convinced that Westernisation means the same as Americanisation, and that is a type of modernisation that is explicitly rejected, thus adding a nationalist component to the discussion arguing for Sinicisation.<sup>52</sup> And this in turn has provoked a yearning for precisely the grandeur of the imperial past that May Fourth, the CCP and the 1949 revolution set out to replace, including some of the symbols held responsible for China's backwardness. This is most clearly visible in the recent assertions of a timeless Chinese culture, the rehabilitation of Confucius and the increasingly positive interpretation and (re)presentation of the imperial dynasties that ruled China for two millennia.<sup>53</sup>

While the sectors of agriculture, industry, national defence and science and technology were reformed and modernised (the Four Modernisations), plans existed to extend these new approaches to the domain of politics as well. While society as a whole was depoliticised to an extent hitherto unknown, the CCP in the end shrank back from reforming the political system as a whole; the move towards some form of democracy

that Deng had hinted at as a Fifth Modernisation has failed to materialise until now. Nonetheless, the more relaxed political atmosphere that marked China in the 1980s and beyond also extended to the cultural sphere. Even though the same cultural structure, organisations and practitioners that had been implicated in creating compliance with the new China of the 1940s and 1950s and in whipping up revolutionary hysteria in the 1960s and 1970s, now was employed to broadcast the unprecedented liberalisation of society, the tone, style and contents of its products were completely different with the removal of heavy-handed political control. For one thing, Socialist Realism was no longer the only artistic style allowed; cultural producers were free to experiment, and this they did with a vengeance, resulting in an ever more depoliticised, market oriented and commercialised popular culture. But equally important, Deng Xiaoping abhorred and generally opposed leader worship of any kind, and this enabled cultural producers to explore creative work that did not need to serve any political purpose or reason. On a more general level, opening up China culturally proved a major impetus for the many changes that followed in the political and economic domains after the early 1980s.

### Concluding Remarks – Chinese Dreams

When considering the history of the PRC as being made up of two discrete periods, i.e., the Maoist era from 1949-1976 and the Reform era from 1978 to the present, it is striking to note that during the first phase, the Chinese dreams, or ambitions, were predominantly focused inward, on national reconstruction and (economic) rehabilitation. The dream to make China rich and strong again after decades of warfare against internal and external enemies dominated the political, economic and cultural agendas but the realisation of this desire was seen as something that the nation needed to do by itself, despite the fact that Western-inspired Marxism-Leninism was adopted as the foundational ideology. This state of mind was strengthened by external political influences which led to the PRC's isolation from the outside world.

The conviction that China could and would succeed in its developmental ambitions by “going it alone” reached its apogee during the Cultural Revolution. And yet, as the philosopher Tang Shaojie noted, while China seemed to have turned inward again, opting for isolation, “[T]he latter part of the Cultural Revolution provoked China to join the world”,<sup>54</sup> and this “[...] paved the way for the post-Cultural Revolution revival and rise of



Chinese modernity, establish[ing] a breeding ground for the next stage of Chinese history, the Reform and Opening, and push[ing] China to, in the last decade of the 20th century, ready itself for daily increases in overall national strength”.<sup>55</sup>



Figure 11 *Wode Zhongguo meng (My Chinese Dream) 我的中国梦*

(designer: Public Service Advertising Art Committee, published by China Internet Television Station

中国网络电视台, 2013, downloaded from the website of the Civilization Office under the CCP Central Committee [[http://www.wenming.cn/jwmsxf\\_294/zggygg/](http://www.wenming.cn/jwmsxf_294/zggygg/)], 22 August 2014)



One can argue that the CCP succeeded to further expand the economic base for China's continued modernisation during the isolation of the Cultural Revolution. Once the nation was able to look outward again, the ambitions that by ideological necessity in the past had been grounded in the observable objective reality of historical materialism now could be openly called and considered as dreams that were within reach of their realisation; the goal of mere national development evolved after the 1980s into a longing for a larger international influence coupled with more global responsibility. The shift from ambition to dream in itself is proof of the depoliticisation PRC society has gone through in the past thirty-plus years. While Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought remains constitutionally enshrined as the guiding ideologies of the PRC and Deng reappropriated Mao's dictum that practice is the sole criterion of truth as his own, a discursive space has emerged in which (wishful) thinking – or dreaming – no longer can be considered a metaphysical, counterrevolutionary activity. The use of the term “dream” (*mengxiang*) in itself emerged around the turn of the century, often in conjunction with China's desire to host the Olympic Games as proof of its level of development and modernity. By 2013, the Chinese Dream had become the ruling title of Xi Jinping, President, General Party Secretary and Commander-in-Chief of the Chinese forces. Although still in need of further definition, the concept currently is defined as “a rich and powerful nation, a revived nationality, a well-off people”. As Ian Johnson has observed while analysing the propaganda posters that went up in the Spring of 2013, the Chinese Dream, “[...] is a redefinition of the state's vision from a Marxist utopia to a Confucian, family-centric nation, defined by a quiet life of respecting the elderly and saving for the future”.<sup>56</sup> This implies that the idea of modernising China as it had been envisioned since the late Qing dynasty continues along a much more traditional and less ideologically driven, revolutionary trajectory than Mao could ever have envisioned.

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## About the Author

**Stefan R. Landsberger** holds the Olfert Dapper Chair of Contemporary Chinese Culture at the University of Amsterdam and is Associate Professor of Contemporary Chinese History and Social Developments at the School of Asian Studies, Leiden University Institute of Area Studies. Landsberger has one of the largest private collections of Chinese propaganda posters in the world outside of China (ca. 1937-present). He has published widely on topics related to Chinese (visual) propaganda, and maintains an extensive website exclusively devoted to this genre of political communications (<http://chineseposters.net>). E-mail: [s.r.landsberger@uva.nl](mailto:s.r.landsberger@uva.nl)