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

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In the PRC, propaganda art gave concrete expression to the abstract policies and the many different grandiose visions of the future that the Chinese Communists had in the 1940s and 1950s, visualising abstract ideas worked especially.

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

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

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

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In the early 1950s, the printing industry was nationalised and a few large printing houses in Beijing and Shanghai dominated the field. Other specialised publishing houses put out materials as well. The Inner Mongolian People’s Publishing House, for example, specialised in (bi- and multi-lingual) posters about and for national minorities, while posters devoted to sports and physical education were published by the Sports Publishing House in Beijing. During the Cultural Revolution, poster production was largely decentralised. In the 1980s, the predominance of the Beijing and Shanghai establishments ended and other publishers took over.

Propaganda posters have been around for more than six decades, and as a result, they form a body of materials that is incredibly rich in information. They are important for what they show, but maybe even more for what they fail to pay attention to...

Art and propaganda posters

What exactly is a propaganda poster? According to many artists and designers the term propaganda art cannot be used indiscriminately to cover all art that has been produced in the PRC. In their opinion, poster art should be divided into discrete genres such as New Year prints (nianhua), oil paintings (youhua), gouache (huafenzhua), woodcuts (mubanhua), traditional paintings (zhongguo hua), propaganda posters (xuanchuan hua), etc. This classification is inspired largely by the way the arts sector was ordered bureaucratically in China. Water colourists did not mix with oil painters, woodcutters worked separately from traditional painters, and propaganda posters artists were at the bottom of the hierarchy. Artists maintain that art can only be called propaganda art when it contains one or more politically inspired slogans. Some of the posters indeed do have explicit political or propagandaistic contents, while others do not. Similarly, some contain one or more politically inspired slogans, but not all of them do.

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

The roots of Chinese propaganda art

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

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

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

Foregoing bravely while following the great leader Chairman Mao. Publisher: Shanghai renmin meishu chubanshe, collective work. April 1969. 72 x 106,5cm. Collection IIEG
Adjustments to propaganda art
But traditional or even 'new' New Year prints were considered as insuffi-
cient or not modern enough. Already prior to the victory over the CMLD, it
was felt that the arts also had to address the audience of urbanites who
were still unfamiliar with, and potentially hostile to, the Party. The Chinese
leaders were convinced that Socialist Realism, as it had been practiced
in the Soviet Union since the 1930s, was the best tool for this. The bright
colours and the happy and prosperous atmosphere that radiated from
Socialist Realism were seen as a continuation of the essential features of
the New Year prints. In the period 1949–1957, many Chinese painters
studied Socialist Realism in Soviet art academies and Soviet professors
came to teach in Chinese institutions. During the Great Leap Forward (1958-1960), Mao insisted that the gloomi-
ness of 'pure' Soviet Socialist Realism was inappropriate now that enthu-
siasm ran high. Romanticism had to make the arts more visionary, to
imbue the people with a spirit of self-sacrifice, hope and enthusiasm to
overcome concrete obstacles. The effects that posters had on mobilizing
the work force convinced the propaganda workers of their usefulness. The
hugely increased demands for art, however, created many opportunities
for amateur peasant and worker painters. The 'official' artists who had
been trained in the art academies considered these amateurs as talented,
but not as true artists.
By 1962, Mao had been pushed out of the centre of power. His artistic poli-
cies were also dismissed. The idealistic and heroic images were replaced
by more romantic visualisations of the good life that the people led under
socialism. Quite a few 'pretty-girl pictures' featuring female beauties, with-
out (hidden) political messages, were produced.

The Cultural Revolution (1965-1976) saw the return of political elements in
art. Every element of poster design was imbued with political symbol-
ism, ranging from the use of colours to the exact placement of persons
within a composition. Many of the posters produced in the early phases
of the Cultural Revolution clearly were made for local purposes. With their
black, red and white colouring, which is unique for this period, they give
out (hidden) political messages, were produced.

A change of policy, a change of style
Although the CCP continued to impose its image of society, an unprec-
edented liberalisation in the arts and visual propaganda took place once
Deng Xiaoping took over in 1978. The period ended the use of Socialist
Realism as the sole principle of creation. Western visual elements made
their way into China as a result of the opening-up of the country. Posters
served glimpses of a future crowded with spacecraft that were clearly mod-
elled on the NASA Space Shuttle; high-speed bullet-trains; high-rise build-
ings; and highways with gridlocked cars. This science fiction has become
reality in the urban consumer society that came about in the 1990s, with
its Carrefour supermarkets and McDonald’s franchises.
The CCP’s inability to win the hearts and minds of the people has become
acute. Has the propaganda poster become obsolete? Has it become a medium
that is identified mainly with a period when the lives of the Chi-
nese were dominated by political struggles? It is certain that the propagan-
da that called for class struggle, for grasping the key link, or for obedience,
no longer has any effects. The public perceives politics is irrelevant, dead
and uninteresting. Government prescriptions about how to lead one’s
life are considered old-fashioned, out of touch with reality and boring.
Commercialism and consumerism are very much alive. And the quality of
the posters falls short of the increasingly high design standards that are
applied in advertising. On the other hand, posters have been used with
some success to create environmental awareness and to correct problems
related to public morality and civic virtue. They now provide public service
and information contents, as the SARS posters in 2003 did, or focus on
neutral subjects such as the Beijing Olympics 2008.
Not much is left of a genre that once was intended to inspire the Chinese
people, to mobilise them, and to point them the way to a future Com-
munist utopia. Political posters are still available, but only collectors from
China and the West are interested in them. The images that once defined
the way China looked have disappeared.

References
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China in posters - the dream reality
17 Highlights from the collections of the International Institute of
Social History, Amsterdam, and Stefan R. Landsberger (University of
Amsterdam, Leiden University). These posters are on display from 14 June to 31
September 2008 in the Kunsthal, Rotterdam. The Netherlands Address: Museumpark,
Westzeedijk 341, 3015 AR Rotterdam. Opening hours: Tuesday till
Saturday 10am-5pm, Sundays and Holidays 11am-5pm
No plans to visit the Netherlands this Summer? Lack of time? Go
to http://chineseposters.net for the web exhibition!