

Visualising China, 1845-1965

Moving and Still images in Historical Narratives

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CONTEXTUALISING (PROPAGANDA) POSTERS

Stefan Landsberger

Increasingly, visual materials are seen as primary source materials for the study of (aspects of) the recent and most recent history of the People's Republic of China. For those periods when moving images were hard to produce, present, store and preserve, visual materials in various printed forms have often become the only remaining witnesses of what the past may have looked like.

When researching visual images, or more specifically in this paper (propaganda) posters that were designed and produced to provide information, change attitudes or even behaviours—in short, images that served to impose a regime of truth—one runs the danger of taking their visual information at face value by considering it as a reflection of reality as it existed at the time of their design or production. A propaganda poster, however, is not necessarily a faithful recording of such an existing reality; it is rather a sanitised version of it, or even a glimpse of an idealised future *based* on a recognisable reality that may have existed. In order to put the information gleaned from the posters into perspective, we need to know more about the dynamics of poster production itself. Moreover, we have to look at the reception of these posters and the effects they may or may not have had.

So what is it exactly that we see when we analyse these posters? What do we know about the broader communications strategy that guided their publication at the time? What do we really know about the actual production process of any given poster, from design to print to distribution to consumption? Were specific artists commissioned for certain topics because of their artistic abilities? Or was it because of their political standpoint? Were the original artworks selected from a much wider offering of similar or comparable pieces? Who decided on the contents or slogan(s) of the posters, or on the number of copies to be printed? Who gave the final *imprimatur*? Were specific themes produced for specific target groups? How, and how widely, were they distributed? Do large numbers of editions and copies printed also mean that the posters in question were in huge demand?

A second, equally important, set of questions deals with the effects these posters may have had. How successful were they in the end in providing information, and in changing attitudes or even behaviours? Were they popular? Were they bought by ordinary people, and if so, why? Were they appreciated for their artistic content or their political intention? Which posters were put up for aesthetic pleasure and which ones served only political or functional goals? What was their symbolic value, if any? As the generations of 'witnesses of history' who actually grew up surrounded by posters and other visual stimuli leave this world, it becomes increasingly difficult to have such questions answered. In the meantime, very little research has been done until now on the actual consumption, reception and influence of posters.

Having collected, analysed and worked with Chinese posters for more than three decades, I think the time has come for us to make a concerted effort to find ways to answer (some of) the questions raised above. This will enable us to find out whether the materials ever served the purposes for which they were produced and thereby establish their usefulness as sources.

PRODUCTION-SIDE QUESTIONS

The Organisational Framework

Exact information about the poster-designing process is hard to come by. After 1949, established artists from many disciplines were co-opted by the regime to produce inspirational and motivational images that could be mass-produced. Long before the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had attained power, the educational deficit of the majority of the population had prompted the policy-makers to look for media and styles with which the problem of illiteracy could be solved. Some of the co-opted artists had a commercial background, having worked for advertising agencies or commercial publishers, some had been exponents of the commercialised 'Shanghai Style' that had been so popular in the urban areas. Other artists had joined the army or revolutionary movement at an early stage and had been trained in the People's Liberation Army (PLA), or had gained prominence during the Yan'an period (1935–47). Many of the latter had started their artistic careers at the Lu Xun Academy of Literature and Art (*Luyi*), established in Yan'an in 1938, and were well-versed in the political dimensions that their works now had to feature. These dimensions, which were related primarily to the position according

to which the arts and artists had to serve politics, had been laid down in Mao Zedong's 'Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art'; and served as the basic literary and art policy for decades. They enabled the CCP, as both patron and educator, to control the arts.¹

Until the start of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, the CCP Central Committee issued all major propaganda policies through its Propaganda Department. This department in turn disseminated these policies through the Propaganda Departments of the Party Committees at each administrative level; through the government's Ministry of Culture; through mass organisations such as the Communist Youth League, Women's Federation, Federation of Trade Unions, and others; and through the mass media. The Propaganda Department's directives also found their way to the Party Committees within the Army. The jurisdiction of the Propaganda Department as a policy-making and coordinating organisation was extremely broad and encompassed 'culture' in all its aspects. It was responsible for day-to-day administration and propaganda; its sub-departments included those overseeing all activities taking place in the sectors of science and technology; literature and art; newspapers and journals; press and publication; education; public health and sports; cultural education; Marxism-Leninism research; editing and translation; policy research; international liaison; and a political department. Through these channels, shining, single-minded and idealistic visions within the official ideological rhetoric were provided and mutually reinforced.²

In the years leading up to the Cultural Revolution, the Army gradually took over from the Propaganda Department and basically became responsible for guiding the arts. In the highly politicised PLA-view, art should unite and educate the people, inspire the struggle of revolutionary people and eliminate the bourgeoisie.³ Art had to be revolutionised and guided by Mao Zedong Thought; its contents had to be militant and to reflect real life. Proletarian ideology, communist morale and spirit, as well as revolutionary heroism took precedence over style and technique. In the PLA-supported imagery of the time, the colour red featured heavily, as red

¹ Joan Lebold Cohen, *The New Chinese Painting 1949-1986* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1987), 22. Bonnie S. McDougall, Mao Zedong's "'Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art': A Translation of the 1953 Text with Commentary", *Michigan Papers in Chinese Studies* No. 39 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1980).

² James Lull, *China Turned On: Television, Reform, and Resistance* (London: Routledge, 1991), 1, 18, 180.

³ Gu Yuan, "Hao bing hao hua" (Good soldiers, good paintings), *Meishu* (1964:4), 33-4. "Meishujia xuexi Jiefangjun meishu" (Artists study PLA art), *Meishu* (1964:4), 23-4.

symbolised everything revolutionary, everything good and moral. The colour black, on the other hand, signified precisely the opposite.⁴

After 1966, the functions and activities of the Propaganda Department were formally taken over by the Cultural Revolution Small Group (headed by Jiang Qing), a situation that lasted until her arrest in October 1976. Once the Cultural Revolution had been officially called to a close in 1976, most of the Party and government organisations that had been disbanded and whose political and ideological practices had been terminated in or after 1966 were revived or reorganised. The Central Committee and the Propaganda Department resumed the formulation of propaganda policies, but the number of responsibilities of, and sub-departments under, the department decreased significantly. In the 1980s, the department's activities started to focus on the supervision of all forms of ideological communications to both Party members and the public; control of the mass media; the educational system; and, as before, the mass organisations. Over time, the department has expanded its activities to cope with increasingly diverse information flows that have emerged in recent times.⁵

The Chain of Command

Before the adoption of the modernisation and reform program in 1978, all officially recognised artists had been employed by art academies, art publishing houses, museums, associations, etc., organisations which, for all intents and purposes, functioned as (state) employers. For the designers and artists in the Army, similar organisations were set up for exclusively military purposes. Employment by one of such organisations literally implied official recognition as an artist. As an employer, the state was thus guaranteed ideological and artistic control over artists and their works. If cultural producers did not behave as 'salaried company men [or women]', and failed to heed the directives emanating from above, or failed to apply self-censorship (also termed as 'the [artist's] appreciation of the social

⁴ Ellen Johnston Laing, *The Winking Owl: Art in the People's Republic of China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 54–6. Scott Minick and Jiao Ping, *Chinese Graphic Design in the Twentieth Century* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1990), 120. Xiao-ming Yang, *The Rhetoric of Propaganda—A Tagmemic Analysis of Selected Documents of the Cultural Revolution in China* (New York, etc.: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1994), 94–7.

⁵ Anne-Marie Brady, *Marketing Dictatorship—Propaganda and Thought Work in Contemporary China* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2008), 13–30.

significance of culture')⁶ to make their art comply with these directives, they faced ostracism and their livelihood would be at stake.

This organisational structure enabled the Propaganda Department's directives to effectively reach the producers of artistic propaganda, both military and civilian, in a number of ways. For civilians, the Ministry of Culture, responsible for the production of art in all its forms, was one channel of communication; the Party Committees that existed within the art organisations formed another; while the associations themselves functioned as mass organisations that were under the direct control of the department. For military artists, the various Party organisations within the command structure at the national, regional and lower levels, as well as the various art academies and organisations that existed within the military, provided the conduit for the directives.

In terms of passing on the propaganda objectives decided at the central level, the civilian and military academies, and occupational and art organisations transformed central policies and adapted them to the peculiarities of the specific artistic media they were responsible for. This could take place at conferences for art workers that were convened at the national or lower levels. Moreover, academies and organisations could take on the guise of ideological watchdogs, by deciding which art reached the audience, and what size that audience would have. Thus, they were responsible not only for the distribution of the finished artistic products of the artists, but also for opportunities to exhibit art in museums; making artistic products available for dissemination through mass media.⁷

Three Design Hypotheses

In principle, the artist's freedom to choose style and subject matter was dependent on the political tensions of the period. In some periods, a limited amount of artistic experimentation was allowed, as during the years of the Hundred Flowers campaign (1956–57) and in the early years of the rule of Deng Xiaoping (1978–80).⁸

But how did the mechanisms of state guidance influence artistic creation and selection? Hypothetically, the following mechanisms for the produc-

⁶ Geremie Barmé, "The Chinese Velvet Prison: Culture in the 'New Age', 1976–89", *Issues & Studies* (August 1989), 64, 73.

⁷ Miklós Haraszti, *The Velvet Prison: Artists under State Socialism* (New York N.Y.: Basic Books, Inc., 1987), 129–41. Cohen, *New Chinese*, 22–3.

⁸ Cohen, *New Chinese*, 23.

tion process of propaganda posters can be constructed, each of which can be put to use in different periods.

The first is the 'made-to-order' mechanism, which would result in the production of propaganda in a 'top-down' fashion. On the basis of indications from the Central Committee, the Propaganda Department formulates the broad ideological guidelines of a propaganda campaign that is to unfold. The artists are subsequently informed of the objectives of the campaign through the various communications channels at the disposal of the department, as outlined above. As a result, the artists' design works in which these objectives are made visible and thereby explained, alongside the previously handed down general artistic guidelines still in force at that specific time. Then, the finished and approved works are reproduced in adequate numbers to be made available to the public.

The second mechanism could work along the following lines and is, what I would term, the 'selection' option, leading to the production of propaganda in a 'bottom-up' way. Artists within the academies and associations are instructed to produce a specific quota of art each year, along the same general artistic guidelines mentioned before. They do this in return for their material upkeep, for which the academies and associations are responsible in name; after all, artists are on the State's payroll. Or else the artists are swept up in the campaigns for which they have to design posters, for example during the heady days of the Great Leap Forward.⁹ The artistic products thus created are subsequently selected by (a section of) the department on the basis of their possible application in a propaganda campaign which is already taking place or is about to be organised.

The third mechanism, and the one most likely to be employed, would combine elements from both the 'top-down' and the 'bottom-up' methods.¹⁰ The Propaganda Department issues its guidelines on a yearly or more frequent basis; these are in line with the tentative plans formulated by the Central Committee on the topics that need to be disseminated. With specific poster reproduction in mind, artists produce a circumscribed number of artworks on the basis of both the ideological and general artistic guidelines. Within each unit, these works are reviewed by its members, a process that is repeated at each successively higher level of bureaucratic organisa-

⁹ Kuiyi Shen, "Propaganda Posters in China", *Chinese Posters—The IISH-Landsberger Collections*, eds. Stefan R. Landsberger and M. van der Heijden (München: Prestel Publishers, 2009). Interview with Ha Qiongwen, veteran artist formerly attached to the Shanghai People's Fine Arts Publishing House (Shanghai, 15 January 1998).

¹⁰ See Jerome Silbergeld (with Gong Jisui), *Contradictions: Artistic Life, the Socialist State and the Chinese Painter Li Huasheng* (Seattle, etc.: University of Washington Press, 1993).

tion.¹¹ The department, or one of its sections, finally selects the artistic products that most appropriately visualise the campaign. These, then, are produced in sufficient quantities to saturate the country.

I suggest that all three of these hypothetical scenarios have been in force in different periods, largely depending on the political atmosphere that had a bearing on the relative agency with which artists could work, as well as their level of independence.

*Printing and Publishing*¹²

In the early 1950s, the printing industry was nationalised. From among the newly organised printing facilities, a few large producers of propaganda posters emerged. They included the People's Publishing House and the People's Fine Arts Publishing House in Beijing, and the Shanghai People's Publishing House and the Shanghai People's Fine Arts Publishing House in Shanghai. Until well into the 1980s, these publishers were to dominate the poster field. Army demands for propaganda were largely met by dedicated military publishers, in particular the People's Liberation Army Pictorial Publishing House.

But one must ask: were they really the only publishers engaged in poster production? Recent acquisitions of odd-sized posters from Shanxi Province, published by the Shanxi People's Publishing House in the period 1974–77, for example, suggest that second- and third-tier publishers had their own printing agenda, as well as their own staff of artists engaged in design. Other recently acquired materials—most notably *menhua* (door posters) that all seem to have been published from the early 1950s until well into the 1990s by the Yunnan Fine Arts Publishing House—further support the suggestion that publishers well away from the centre produced posters for specific purposes too.

Other provincial or specialised publishing houses put out materials as well. The Inner Mongolian People's Publishing House, for example, specialised in posters about and for national minorities, often providing slogans in Chinese accompanied by other minority script(s), including Mongol and Tibetan. Posters devoted to sports and physical education were published by the Sports Publishing House in Beijing. By the 1980s, the predominance of the Beijing and Shanghai establishments had eroded and other publishers took over as

¹¹ Silbergeld, *Contradictions*, 5.

¹² This section is based on an analysis of the publishers' information provided in the impressums of the posters of *The IISH/Stefan R. Landsberger Collections*.

the main source for posters. The Sichuan People's Publishing House was responsible for most posters produced in the 1980s, while the Legal Publishing House put out many two- and three-sheet series devoted to spreading knowledge about the newly emerging legal framework. For the posters produced in the 1990s and later, the Hubei Fine Arts Publishing House seems to have been contracted as the main producer. After 2000, nationally produced poster campaigns seem to have come to an end. District or even residential area administrations, *shequ* (社区), have become the main providers of materials. And during the SARS crisis of 2003, most of the campaign propaganda originated in the Ministry of Health, instead of through the channels that were previously employed in the production and distribution of propaganda.

The sustained use of posters for mass campaigns suggests that massive numbers of printed campaign materials have been produced. Until now, it has proven to be impossible to get hold of reliable information that unequivocally states which publishing house published which posters and in what quantities. As far as can be ascertained, no central, comprehensive catalogue exists in China covering all posters that have been published since (or even before) 1949. Nor is it clear whether a mechanism of compulsory 'legal deposit' existed at the central level, under which all publishers had to present a copy of everything they produced to some central archive.

During a field trip in January 1998, the major publishing houses in Beijing and Shanghai were visited.¹³ Interviews with company representatives revealed not only that there were no existing records or no longer any existing records on poster publishing activities in the past, but also that the individual publishers had not maintained archives of any of their production activities. Some spokespersons even denied that their publishing houses had ever been involved in the production of propaganda posters, an assertion that could easily be refuted.

If the publishers themselves no longer maintain, or never maintained, records of the posters they produced, it would be interesting to identify alternative institutions involved in the production and distribution of the posters to find out if they still have records of production. Local records may shed more light on local poster production, as do the local gazetteers that have resumed publication from the 1980s. From conversations with

¹³ The following publishers were visited: People's Publishing House, People's Fine Arts Publishing House, People's Sports Publishing House, People's Educational Publishing House (Beijing), Shanghai People's Publishing House and Shanghai's People's Fine Arts Publishing House (Shanghai). The CCP Translation Bureau served as the host unit.

fellow collectors in China, it has become clear that many of the items in their collections came from printing plant inventories. However, a survey of this sector of poster production would probably turn up only production order slips and no other information on the broader production process.

An exciting source of information is provided by the illustrated brochures that poster publishers used to send out every year to the potential customers of the New China Bookstores (*Xinhua shudian*) that served as the outlets for consumers. These illustrated catalogues, of which more than 100 copies—ranging from 1949 to 1991—have been collected by the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam, give an insight into the new products of a single publisher from a given year, including extensive data pertaining to the images, a back catalogue and an order form. Such catalogues, called *nianhua suoyang* (年画缩样) but not restricted to *nianhua* (New Years prints), enable a comprehensive reconstruction of the complete official poster production of a particular publisher and may provide clues about the appearance and disappearance of themes and motifs (fig. 8.1). The main drawback of this approach is that it only covers works at the level of the individual publishing houses. A comprehensive reconstruction of poster production at the national level would depend on the acquisition of as many and as wide a variety of catalogues as possible.

But when analysing the availability of posters in a given year from these catalogues, can we really infer how widely available they were? Did the central publishers in Beijing and Shanghai, and maybe even Tianjin, monopolise the market, penetrating all of China's localities? Or did posters produced by Hunan, Liaoning or Shaanxi publishers reach other parts of China as well? Given the problems of infrastructure and distribution that plagued China in the 1950s and subsequent decades, one could argue that the availability of posters was predicated by what local publishers produced. Was there a hierarchy in publishing houses and their publications? A related problem is that of the *Xinhua Shudian*, the New China Bookstore. This institution served as the main distributor of posters (and books) and doubled as the owner of a nationwide network of bookstores. At the same time, *Xinhua Shudian*, in numerous instances, has functioned as a poster publisher. At this point in time it is not clear whether the organisation itself ever produced catalogues.

Moreover, during some periods, poster design and production took place outside the bureaucratic and administrative framework. In the feverish atmosphere of the Great Leap, professional artists were sent down to factories and rural villages to find inspiration by personally participating in rural



Fig. 8.1. *Suoyang* (Publishers' catalogues)

or industrial labour. There they came into contact with large numbers of amateur painters among the peasants and workers. The central demands for a Great Leap in art production, calling for a huge increase in the *quantity* of art, created many opportunities for these amateurs, and many of them embarked on an artistic career.¹⁴ Since much of their works were created outside the official arts structure, we have no idea about their contents or numbers.

And in the years 1966–69, poster production was largely decentralised to the provincial or municipal publishers. Moreover, many Red Guard factions published their own materials, often in the much sought-after simple red/black/white colour scheme that was reminiscent of the block prints produced in the Yan'an era (fig. 8.2). The success of this particular nostalgic artistic style can be proven by the fact that even the few larger poster production units, that were still functioning at the time, published posters in this vein (fig. 8.3). Although we know of (some of) these centrally published posters, we have no idea about the number of designs produced locally, let alone the quantities in which they were produced.

¹⁴ Situ Chang, “*Shinian laide qunzhong meishu huodong (chugao)*” (The mass art movement in the last ten years (first draft)), *Meishu yanjiu* (1959:2), 20, 21, 23. Minick and Jiao, *Chinese Graphic Design*, 108–13. Laing, *Winking Owl*, 30–2, 83.



Fig. 8.2. The 3 July and 24 July proclamations are Chairman Mao's great strategic plans! Unite with forces that can be united with to strike surely, accurately and relentlessly at the handful of class enemies. (Publisher unknown, ca. 1968. Designer unknown 佚名)
(for the colour image see the plate section)

Publication Figures

While exact information for the poster publishing industry as a whole is lacking, it is possible to find publication figures for certain individual years. Yearbooks for the publishing and printing industries may contain the type of information that we are looking for. Moreover, unexpected sources, such as journals devoted to art, can present us with much needed information. From the incomplete statistics provided by *Renmin meishu* (People's Art) in April 1950, for example, it can be calculated that in 1949, 379 different poster designs were published, with a total print run of almost 6.8 million copies. As for their contents, some ten per cent of these were devoted to the founding of the PRC, and 13 per cent had the deep love of the people for the leadership as their subject. While another ten per cent showed the



Fig. 8.3. Long live the victory of Chairman Mao's revolutionary line! (Hebei renmin meishu chubanshe 河北人民美术出版社, ca. 1966, print no. T8087.2004. Designer: Liaison station of the Red Revolutionary Rebels of the National Art World)
(for the colour image see the plate section)

close relations between the Army and the people, a whopping 31 per cent of them were devoted to agricultural production. Such data really can point to the political priorities at the time.¹⁵ By painstakingly sifting through similar sources, Shen Kuiyi has calculated that the Shanghai People's Fine Arts Publishing House published more than 2,000 poster designs in 40 million copies between 1954–66, whereas the Beijing People's Fine Arts Publishing House published 500 poster designs, in some 28 million copies,

¹⁵ Jian An, "Yijiuwuling nian nianhua gongzuode jixiang tongji" (Some statistics on New Year print production in 1950), *Renmin meishu* 2 (April 1950), 52–3.

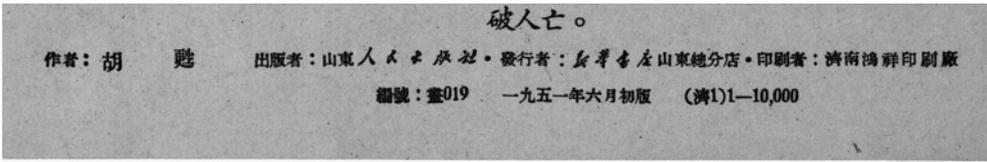


Fig. 8.4. Impressum first print (1951)

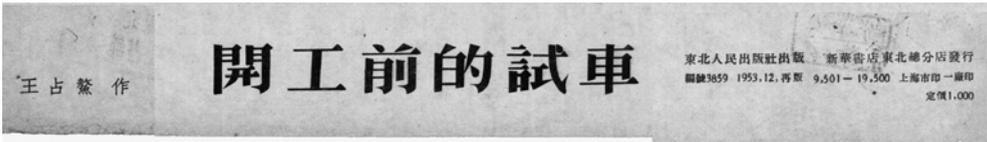


Fig. 8.5. Impressum second print (1953)

between 1951–59.¹⁶ From yet another source, *Meishu* (Fine Arts), published in 1960, we can glean information about a single publisher's output. The Tianjin Fine Arts Publishing House produced 17 different poster designs in 1957, with a total print run of 144,000 copies; 130 posters in 1958, totalling 13.2 million copies; and 120 posters in 1959, with total print numbers of 3.4 million copies.¹⁷

Of course, there is the information provided at the level of the individual poster: the impressum that often (but not always) can be found in the lower right-hand corner of the poster can serve as another source of information. These imprints can indicate the publisher, number of editions and size of the print runs (figs. 8.4 and 8.5). This, however, is a problematic source that is only worthwhile when the total number of editions published is known, or when one has the opportunity to inspect the same poster in as many subsequent editions as possible. Otherwise, and that is the main drawback of the information provided here, one will be surprised time and again by later editions and ever-growing numbers of copies printed.

¹⁶ Kuiyi Shen, "Propaganda Posters and Art during the Cultural Revolution", *Art and China's Revolution*, eds. Melissa Chiu and Zheng Shengtian (Asia Society/Yale University Press, 2009), 156.

¹⁷ "Cujin xuanchuanhua zhuangzuode gengda fazhan" (Promote an even greater development in the creation of propaganda posters), *Meishu* 2 (1960), 8.

RECEPTION-SIDE QUESTIONS

The second group of questions and concerns deals with the reception, popularity and influence of the propaganda posters. Most official Chinese sources stress the line that the people liked the posters produced by the CCP, rather than other more frivolous or more traditional visual materials. These reports however, no matter whether they were written up in the early days of the PRC or later, give no account of the educational effects that the posters may have had. The numerous conversations I have had with Chinese from all walks of life, over the past three decades and more, present a picture that modifies the official interpretation of the appreciation and/or effectiveness of posters. Many people often would remark that 'nobody in China liked these things', indicating that the materials were apparently not up to the aesthetic standards of the target groups, or that 'nobody would buy these things anyway', pointing to a situation where nobody seemed to consume such images.¹⁸ This reaction is rather difficult to believe, as I will try to argue below.

Traditionally, educating the people has been viewed as a function of good government in China. Since 1949, this educational effort has continued as if nothing had changed. Propaganda posters played a major supporting role in the many campaigns that were designed to mobilise the people, and they have been the favoured medium for educational purposes, particularly given the large number of illiterates China had in the early decades of the PRC. After all,

[p]ropaganda posters, with their simple, lively forms and bright, powerful images, as well as their high volume printing and circulation throughout the whole nation, publicize the principles and policies of the party and government to the multitude of the masses. This unique form of art [...] enables the policies of the party and the government to open the door to the hearts of the people and inspire their utmost efforts.¹⁹

Seen from this perspective, we should not find it strange that no proof exists that the CCP, throughout its more than six decades in power, ever considered undertaking research into the reception and effectiveness of its campaign materials; they were simply seen as the right message at the right time. This

¹⁸ Stefan R. Landsberger, "Confessions of a Poster Collector", *Reminiscences and Ruminations—China Information Anniversary Supplement*, vol. 9, No. 1 (Summer 1994), 38.

¹⁹ "Editor's Words", *Shinian xuanchuanhua xuan* (Ten years of propaganda posters) (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin meishu chubanshe, 1960), quoted in Kuiyi Shen, "Publishing Posters Before the Cultural Revolution", *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, vol. 12, No.2 (Fall 2000), 177.

will make establishing whether propaganda posters succeeded in changing attitudes, or even behaviours, a daunting, but not impossible task.

Lacking any formal research on reception then forces us to look for other ways to find out how posters were received by the people they were designed for. In the early 1950s, it seems that prototypical focus groups of a type were used to critically evaluate art that had been newly produced (and therefore became the source for many new propaganda posters). The findings of such focus group sessions usually took the form of reports about visits of groups of peasants, workers and/or soldiers to an exhibition, accompanied by a journalist. The criticisms of the group members ('we don't work with implements like that', 'we don't wear those clothes in the fields', or 'with this machine you could never smelt steel') appeared in art journals like *Renmin meishu* (People's Arts), followed by exhortations directed at artists to take a more serious look at the real lives of the people.²⁰ The format of these reports and the publications in which they appeared make it clear that if such focus group meetings had ever taken place spontaneously, the utterances of the group members would not necessarily have been similar to what was later printed. One may even wonder whether such meetings had ever really taken place, and whether the opinions uttered in the reports were not those of bureaucrats in the arts establishment. It is sad to say that the ultimate critics represented neither the real interests of the target groups nor those of the art producers, but only the narrowly circumscribed agenda of the political organisation they worked for.

These reports were obviously used to educate and even discipline the artists—to force them to study real life, to make them leave the ivory towers of their academies and 'live with the people', and spend more time in factories and in the countryside—in order to be able to produce images that were true to life, something which the artists did with varying success.²¹ Exhibition reviews continued to be favoured as proof that what the artists created was in line with what the people wanted; all followed the same didactic pattern:

²⁰ Cai Ruohong, "Guanyu xin nianhuade chuangzuo neirong" (On the creative contents of new New Year prints), *Renmin meishu* (2) (April 1950), 22. Zhong Dianfei, "Cong jin niande nianhua zuopin kan nianhuaqiade yishu sixiang" (Looking at the artistic thought of New Year print-makers on the basis of this year's New Year prints), *Renmin meishu* (2) (April 1950), 28. Shi Lu, "Nianhua chuangzuo jiantao" (Self-criticism of New Year print creation), *Renmin meishu* (2) (April 1950), 31.

²¹ "Meishujia zai Yuejin" (Artists in the Great Leap), *Meishu yanjiu* (1958: 2), 5–17.

the artworks were not necessarily appreciated for their aesthetic qualities, but for their verisimilitude or revolutionary contents.²²

These staged occasions of popular art appreciation only elicited politically correct answers and do not tell us anything about what the people really thought, or whether they really liked what they saw; nor do they indicate whether people were actually willing to spend money on the reproductions. Did people really ‘never like these things’, as many told me? And if they really did not like them, why were the large numbers of posters, mentioned above, published in the first place?

Memoirs

Most of the memoirs written by those taking part in the events after the founding of the PRC are curiously silent about the ‘artistic’ posters that were published in such abundance in these years.²³ No mention is made of all the exhortatory art (posters, sculptures, postage stamps, etc.) that surrounded them at work, in the barracks, at school or in their private spaces. In contrast, those taking part in the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) devote much attention to the ‘big-character-posters’ (*dazibao*) and their effects on the movement.²⁴ Among them, only a few authors explicitly address the influence ‘artistic’ propaganda posters had on them in their youth. One of them, Xiaomei Chen, wrote about her memories of growing up in the Maoist era. She concluded that ‘... posters ... constructed and reconstructed who I was and what was socially expected of me’.²⁵ In a similar manner, the well-known novelist, Anchee Min, remembered her desire to be and act just like the girls in the posters she saw all over the

²² Wang Mingxiang, “The Red Guards’ Fine Arts Campaign”, *Art and China’s Revolution*, 194–6, 198.

²³ Interviews with independent art consultant/collector Yang Peiming (Shanghai, 17 January and 3 December 1998); Qian Daxin and Ha Qiongwen, veteran artists with the Shanghai People’s Fine Arts Publishing House (Shanghai, 15 January 1998).

²⁴ Such memoirs include Yan Jiaqi and Gao Gao, *Wenhua dageming’ shinian shi 1966–76* (The History of the Ten Years of the ‘Cultural Revolution’) (Tianjin: Tianjin renmin chubanshe, 1986). Ken Ling, *The Revenge of Heaven* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972). Liang Heng and Judith Shapiro, *Son of the Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983). Anita Chan, *Children of Mao—Personality Development and Political Activism in the Red Guard Generation* (London: Macmillan, 1985). Gao Yuan, *Born Red—A Chronicle of the Cultural Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987). Feng Jicai, *Ten Years of Madness—Oral Histories of China’s Cultural Revolution* (San Francisco: China Books & Periodicals, Inc., 1996).

²⁵ Xiaomei Chen, “Growing up with Posters in the Maoist Era”, *Picturing Power in the People’s Republic of China—Posters of the Cultural Revolution*, eds. Harriet Evans and Stephanie Donald (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 105.

place, and in fact even succeeded in becoming a poster girl herself, posing for a design by the veteran poster artist, Ha Qiongwen. Xiao Wule's memoirs of growing up in the 1970s indicated how influential posters were on the development of his worldview, and how ill-prepared this poster vision made him for the changes that occurred in China in the 1980s and later. This latter experience suggests that posters as a learning tool only worked under the circumstances under which they were produced.²⁶

The seeming absence of posters in the published recollections of contemporaries may be explained by the fact that they had become unaware of them, just as they no longer heard the endlessly blaring loudspeakers that polluted the aural environment. Abundant photographic and cinematographic records, after all, contradict the non-presence of posters, as well as the remarks that 'nobody in China liked these things' or would buy them. Many of these records show posters stuck to walls in professional and private surroundings. On the basis of the necessity that good propaganda should reflect real life (and at the same time suggest how this should and could be better), we have to conclude that posters actually formed part of the backdrop of the lives of the Chinese, both in urban and rural settings. And if these posters did not address the goals of the next Five Year Plan, the mechanisation of agriculture, campaigns against illiteracy, the ferreting out of Guomindang spies, or the expectations of the Great Leap Forward, then more and more of them were devoted to Mao Zedong:²⁷

His 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 ... 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.²⁸

²⁶ Anchee Min, "The Girl in the Poster", *Chinese Propaganda Posters—From the Collection of Michael Wolf*, ed. B. Taschen (Köln: Taschen, 2003), 3–9. Xiao Wule, *Jiqing shishang—70 niandai Zhongguo rende yishu yu shenghuo* (The fashion of fervor—art and life of the Chinese of the 1970s) (Jinan: Shandong huabao chubanshe, 2002).

²⁷ Stefan R. Landsberger, "The Deification of Mao: Religious Imagery and Practices during the Cultural Revolution and Beyond", *China's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution: Master Narratives and Post-Mao Counternarratives*, ed. Woei Lien Chong (Boulder: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002), 140.

²⁸ Göran Aijmer, "Political Ritual: Aspects of the Mao Cult During the Cultural 'Revolution'", *China Information* 11, nos. 2/3 (Autumn/Winter 1996), 221, 222, 226.

And closer to the homes of the people:

... Mao became a regular presence in every home, either in the form of his official portrait, or as a bust or statue. Not having the Mao portrait on display 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 in the day-to-day affairs of the people as well. For this reason, the families of those identified as belonging to the landlord class or as bad elements often were not permitted to display Mao's portrait. The formal portrait often occupied the central place on the family altar, or at least the spot where that altar had been located before being demolished during the 'Destroy the Four Olds' campaign in the early days of the Cultural Revolution by work teams or by bands of radicalised students returning home from their universities. This placement added to the already god-like stature of Mao as it was created in propaganda posters. The teams' intention was to replace the worship of the 'old' gods and superstitious symbols with the worship of Mao by presenting his image and words as sacred symbols.²⁹

With an estimated 2.2 billion official Mao portraits printed during the Cultural Revolution, or 'three for every person in the nation', it is safe to say that as far as the copies of the official image are concerned, few doubts can exist about their consumption: they were bought, distributed, handed out as keepsakes, and found their way onto Chinese walls.³⁰ The motivation behind Mao's arrival into the homes could have been manifold, ranging from true worship to calculated political activism to political expediency.

But what about all these other, often much more interesting materials *sans Mao* that we have been analysing? A number of observations can be made on them:

- schools at all levels had a poster library or reference-materials room, where copies of posters were available for teaching purposes;³¹
- factories, Party offices, army meeting rooms, shop floors, community rooms, etc. exhibited posters relevant to the movements their

²⁹ Landsberger, "Deification of Mao", 153–4

³⁰ Geremie Barmé, *Shades of Mao—The Posthumous Cult of the Great Leader* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1996), 8. *Weidade lingxiu he daoshi Mao Zedong zhuxi* (The great leader and teacher Chairman Mao Zedong), published by Renmin meishu chubanshe, print no. 8027.4696, saw its 157th edition in October 1977.

³¹ Even today, posters hailing from these sources can be identified by the organisation's seal stamped on the back and the call number, indicating that some method of cataloguing was employed. These catalogues would also provide more background about the process of acquiring and funding these materials, as well as the nature and quantity of the materials available at the time.

organisations were involved in, as a way of mobilising or educating their members;

- in so-called mass art centres (*qunzhong meishu guan*) that could be found in smaller urban communities and in the countryside, not only were the masses given the opportunity to learn to produce their own art, but also exhibitions of politically relevant posters were held;
- in a number of cases, members of an organisation or a social group (parents, for example) were presented with a copy of a suitable, representative piece of art to commemorate an event, their contribution to society, or another important occasion. Examples include parents whose children were sent down (during the so-called *xia xiang shang shan* movement); members of various municipal administrations, etc.

These observations suggest that the opportunities for frequent encounters with posters existed for most Chinese. However, seeing posters outside of the home does not necessarily have the same impact as actually having posters within one's own domestic sphere. We do know that pre-modern Chinese households were traditionally adorned with utilitarian-magical prints:

During the New Year festival, more than 20 varieties of New Year prints would be stuck on the front gates, doors onto the courtyard, walls of a room, besides a room's windows, or on the water vat, rice cabinet, granary, or livestock fold. Colourful and floral prints would be everywhere in the house to express the hopes and joy of the festival.³²

But we do not know how individual poster acquisition really worked. Revolutionary propaganda posters were cheap and widely available and provided an excellent way to bring some colour to the otherwise drab places where most people lived. Posters were liked for their colours, composition and visual content, and people did not pay too much attention to the slogans that might be printed underneath. In a number of cases, posters were given to commemorate a special, *private* occasion. *The IISH/Landsberger Collection* holds a number of posters that have served as gifts, as indicated by some calligraphy added after their publication (usually in the top-right and bottom-left corners). These inscriptions note the occasion for the gift (for example a wedding), the recipients as well as the donors, and sometimes the date of the event (fig. 8.6). If nothing else, this must

³² Wang Shucun, *Ancient Chinese Woodblock New Year Prints* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1985), 5.

mean that posters fulfilled a social function, or were ascribed with some form of social capital. Obviously, such personalised poster gifts cannot be compared, for example, with the sets of Mao's Selected Works that were handed out during the Cultural Revolution: these book copies were not directly linked to the recipients.³³

Triggering Memories

Again, we have to turn to photographic or cinematographic types of evidence to find out if and how urban and rural households were penetrated by propaganda posters. A recent line of inquiry that I have been pursuing is that of Chinese historical television drama series. Often available in DVD box-sets for easy perusal, these soap operas can provide an incredible addition to the memory game. A good example of such a series is *Jin Hun* (Golden Marriage),³⁴ directed by Zheng Xiaolong; premiering in 2006, various second-tier and third-tier broadcasters were still showing instalments in 2010.³⁵ Tracking the tumultuous 50-year marriage of the engineer/worker Tong Zhi (played by Zhang Guoli) and the primary-school teacher Wen Li (Jiang Wenli) in 50 instalments, the series takes the viewer through the upheavals China went through during the period 1956–2006. In 2009, a carbon copy of *Golden Marriage*, *Wang Gui yu Anna* (Wang Gui and Anna)³⁶ met with comparable success. Here, a worker-peasant-soldier (*gongnongbing*) professor (a former peasant) marries a young woman from an intellectual background with a Shanghai *hukou* (registration). This drama series takes the 1970s as its point of departure and ends 32 instalments later in the year 2008. Like *Golden Marriage*, it shows many true-to-life interiors and exteriors featuring posters.

The value of series like these, for the poster researcher, lies in the immaculate way in which the sets have been dressed, the unbelievable eye for detail: throughout all the instalments of both series referred to above, the posters visible in the backgrounds, both outside and indoors, completely tally with the dates in which the dramatic events take place. In other words, if such serial dramas are to serve a political function—and

³³ Landsberger, "Deification of Mao", 154.

³⁴ See <http://ent.sina.com.cn/f/v/gmarriage/index.shtml>, last accessed 7 October 2010.

³⁵ See <http://movie.video.sina.com.cn/teleplay/jh/detail.html> for the 50 flash video (flv) format installments, last accessed 7 October 2010. Personal observations, April–May, September 2010.

³⁶ See <http://www.nntv.com.cn/tv/dsjc/ShowArticle.asp?ArticleID=27670>, last accessed 7 October 2010.



Fig. 8.6. Study hard to become a proletarian revolutionary successor (Zhejiang renmin meishu chubanshe 浙江人民美术出版社, September 1964), print no. T8156.252.

Designer Xin Liliang
(for the colour image see the plate section)

this is not the place to discuss this issue—and are intended to have an educational value, they must reflect reality; that reality shows the presence of posters. In short, watching television actually may help us in forming an impression of the public presence of posters and of poster consumption on a personal level. Moreover, given the popularity of these historical dramas, they can be used to trigger the memory of respondents.

Another way of triggering the memories of potential respondents is to have them look at posters. Recording their recollections and reactions enables us to find out about the ‘personal’ effects of poster consumption. An example of such an approach is ‘China: A Moment in Time—Selected Recollections Gathered in China’,³⁷ a project initiated around 1996 by Prof. John Regan of the School of Educational Studies of Claremont Graduate University.³⁸ Based on a collection of 140 posters donated to the school, they have been used in social, cultural, educational, political and visual studies related to China.³⁹ Eight posters, all dating from the 1970s, are shown on the project website, accompanied by remarks that the images triggered among the Chinese respondents. Some of these recollections and reactions are about what we as poster researchers are interested in; others not necessarily so. But even though not necessarily limited to the posters themselves, the experiences of the respondents travelling down memory lane can shed light on many episodes of PRC history and fill in the gaps of our own understanding.

CONCLUSIONS

This essay has been written as a call to start work on establishing the credentials of Chinese propaganda posters as reliable sources. From the discussion of the design side of the posters, it is obvious that we need to know more about how the actual dynamics and processes of design and selection, and of the visualising of abstract policies, worked. To gain insight into these problems, a number of interconnected projects could be set up, aimed at delving into the memories of representatives of the art and propaganda bu-

³⁷ See <http://www.cgu.edu/pages/3050.asp>, last accessed 7 October 2010.

³⁸ See also Weijiang Zhang’s contribution and Kathryn Flynn, “Seeking the Inner Uniqueness of a Culture’s ‘Z’ Level, 1997”—The Unrecognized, Shared Information Concerning each Person’s Knowledge of Artifacts”, in Weijiang Zhang’s, “Reflections on Excellence—20 Years of Innovative Educational Thinking”, *Issues in Communication Series: The Communication Project* (Claremont: Claremont Graduate University, 2003), 20–4 and 24–9.

³⁹ Zhang, “Reflections”, 21.

reaucracies, museum and academy administrators, association members and the artists themselves. The information thus gathered would provide us with the necessary tools to start constructing a model that sheds light on production issues. The documentary *Red Arts* (2007), directed by Hu Jie and Ai Xiaoming and chronicling the rise (and fall) of the Huxian peasant painting movement in the early 1970s,⁴⁰ can serve as an illustration of how fruitful such an approach can be.⁴¹

Now that revolutionary (propaganda) art has become a marketable commodity in China and abroad, it is also worthwhile to take a closer look at the auction catalogues that have started appearing. An example of the excellent information such sources can provide is the back-story provided by Wang Hui to his *Long Live Chairman Mao's Proletarian Revolutionary Line* (以毛主席的无产阶级革命路线胜利万岁) (1967), originally a unique wall painting erected on the West side of Tian'anmen, later reproduced as a two-sheet poster by the Jinggangshan Rebels in their *Jinggangshan zhanbao* (井冈山战报).⁴²

Artists often seem reluctant to dwell on the past, as is illustrated by Melissa Chiu and Zheng Shengtian's edited volume published on the occasion of the Asia Society's Exhibition *Art and the Chinese Revolution* (5 September 2008 to 11 January 2009). Here, Chinese artists are given a voice, either in the form of an interview or by they themselves penning their reminiscences of the creation of certain works.⁴³ Although these chapters shed some light on a number of the issues touched upon above, they keep a respectful distance from critical issues and uniformly fail to enlighten us in any way about the material, political and psychological conditions and pressures that artists had to work under. Instead, they raise more questions than they answer—for example, about the direct relations and communication patterns between Party leaders and artists, the attitudes of the artists towards Party policies and leaders in general (and their own (political)

⁴⁰ Hu Jie and Ai Xiaoming, dir. *Red Arts* (Hong Kong, Visible Records Ltd., 2007).

⁴¹ For the Huxian Peasant Movement: Wang Mingxian and Yan Shanchun, *Xin Zhongguo meishu tushi—1966–76* (Illustrated Art History of New China—1966–76) (Beijing: Zhongguo qingnian chubanshe, 2000), 110–6. Jutta Bewig, ed. *Bauernmalerei aus Huxian* (Peasant Paintings from Huxian) (Frankfurt/M: Gesellschaft für Deutsch-Chinesische Freundschaft, 1979). Liu Zhide a.o., *Huxian nongminhua* (Peasant Paintings from Huxian) (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1974).

⁴² Huachen 2005 Autumn Auctions, 1938–1991: *Lishide zhuti* (1938–91: History Under Painting-Brush) (Beijing, n.d.), non-paginated.

⁴³ For example, Zheng Shengtian, "Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan: A Conversation with the Artist Liu Chunhua", and Shen Jiawei, "The Fate of a Painting", *Art and China's Revolution*, 119–31 and 132–48, respectively.



Fig. 8.7. Long live the victory of the proletarian revolutionary line with Chairman Mao as its representative! Long live the victory of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution!
(Publisher unknown, ca. 1967. Designer Wang Hui)
(for the colour image see the plate section)

patrons in particular), their comparatively well-off lifestyle, and the relative freedom the artists apparently enjoyed in travelling to various parts of the nation—all of which was so different from the circumstances of the people for whom these works were ultimately produced.

As with questions related to the production side of posters, it would be worthwhile to contemplate setting up a project to gain insight into their popular consumption, reception, popularity and influence. Such projects would need to take the form of a major research undertaking. But everybody interested in and/or working with these posters could also individually try and mine the memories of their own colleagues, friends and contacts from and in China; when the information from these personal enquiries could somehow be shared somewhere, the establishment of some sort of memory bank on the Internet could be envisioned.

Needless to say, memory is a fickle source, and the information gained should be used with caution. Respondents may easily make claims that the posters provided them with information on campaign targets, but when it comes to changing attitudes or even behaviours, a different picture may emerge. In the meantime, it could be worthwhile to watch Chinese historical television dramas to get a feel of what respondents might come up with.

In short, a number of questions on Chinese propaganda posters needs to be further looked into, in order to fill in the blank spots in our knowledge of the production side, as well as the reception side, of the posters. By taking our research beyond the surface of the posters, we can establish their value as sources. The possible approaches outlined here share one common element: they delve into the memories of the people intimately concerned

with propaganda posters, both on the production side and on the consumption side.

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