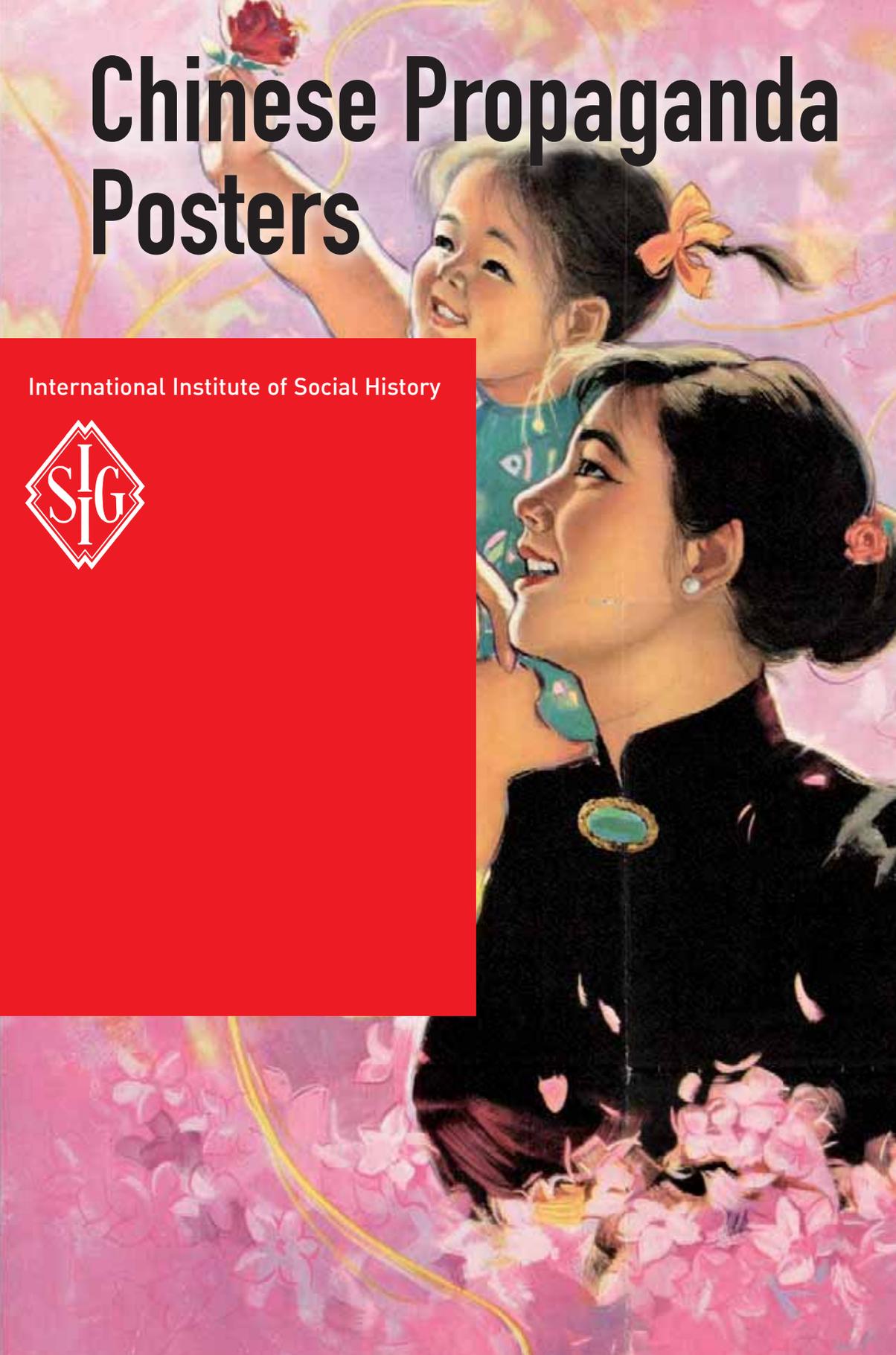


Chinese Propaganda Posters

International Institute of Social History



Chinese Propaganda Posters

Colorful propaganda posters have accompanied almost every event or development that took place in the People's Republic of China (PRC) since its founding in 1949. These posters were intended to mobilize, inform, congratulate, inspire, instruct, or appease the people. The accessibility of the poster message for the large number of illiterates in China was an important reason behind the production of posters.

The medium of the poster has had an enormous visual impact on Chinese society, and this continues until today, even though it now lost ground to commercial advertising and television. A walk through the poster gallery of the People's Republic that history has left us enables us to get a glimpse of the changes in how China and its ruling Communist Party perceived itself, and its future, over the years.

Although the propaganda poster was very much part and parcel of the political reality of the PRC, its usage was not invented by the Communist Party and could boast of a long tradition. Through all of its long history, the Chinese political system had used the arts to present and spread correct behaviour and thought. Literature, poetry, painting, stage

Defeat Japanese imperialism Dadao Riben diguozhuyi
Anti-Japanese propaganda from the Nationalist Party (Guomindang). Japan invades China in 1937 and holds a large part of the country occupied.
Designer unknown, ca. 1937
Size: 64.5x39 cm. Call number: D25/197

plays, songs and other artistic expressions were produced to entertain, but they also were given an important didactic function: they had to educate the people in what was considered right and wrong. According to the political theories adhered to at the time, as long as the State provided examples of correct behaviour, this automatically would make the people believe what was seen as proper.





Once the PRC was established in 1949, propaganda art was employed as one of the major means to provide examples of correct behaviour. It gave a concrete expression to the many different abstract policies, and the many different grandiose visions of the future that the Chinese Communist Party proposed and entertained over the years. In a country with as many illiterates as China had in the 1940s and 1950s, this method of visualizing abstract ideas worked especially well to educate the people. Propaganda posters could be produced cheaply and easily. Because they were widely available, they could be seen everywhere and brought some color to the otherwise drab places where most of the people lived and worked: houses and dormitories, offices and factories. Posters penetrated every level of social organization and cohabitation.

Look! Look! The cruel injustice of the Communist Party Kan! Kan! Gongchandang zhi canhai Japanese propaganda. The Communist Party, in blue uniform, receives money from the red devil hiding behind a friendly Western mask. Designer unknown, ca. 1938 Size: 76x104 cm. Call number: E27/166

Most people liked the posters for their colors, composition and visual contents, and did not pay too much attention to the slogans that might be printed underneath. This caused the political message of the posters to be passed on in an almost subconscious manner.

The most talented artists were mobilized to visualize the political trends of the moment in the most detailed way. Many of them had been designers of the commercial calendars that had been so popular before the People's Republic was founded. These artists were quickly co-opted and incorporated in the

various government and party organizations that were made responsible to produce propaganda posters. These artists were, after all, well versed in design techniques and able to visualize a product in an attractive way. The images they made often were figurative and realistic. The aim of these idealized images was to portray the future in the present, not only showing "life as it really is," but also "life as it ought to be". These works created a type of 'faction,' a hybrid of 'fact' and 'fiction,' stressing the positive and glossing over anything negative.

Posters were reproduced in journals and magazines; they were reprinted as large-format posters, or in smaller formats; some were even turned into postage stamps. The 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.

The contents of the posters were largely defined by the themes of politics and economic reconstruction that were dominant in China after 1949, such as the building the People's Republic (1949-1956), the Korean War (1950-1953), the First Five Year Plan (1953-1957), the Great Leap Forward (1956-1960), the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the struggle for power after the death of Mao Zedong (1976-1978), the Four Modernizations under Party leader Deng Xiaoping (1978-1982). For most of the time, hyper-realistic ageless, larger-than-life peasants, soldiers, workers and youngsters in dynamic poses peopled the images. They pledged allegiance to the Communist cause, or obedience to Chairman Mao Zedong, or were engaged in the glorious task of rebuilding the nation. Posters usually glorified work and personal

sacrifice for the greater well-being. Only in the early 1950s and since the mid 1980s, more than occasional attention is paid to the personal and private dimension of the people's lives, rest and recreation.

In the early 1950s, the printing industry was nationalized. From among the newly organized 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 would dominate the poster field. Of course, other provincial or specialized publishing houses would put out materials as well, such as the Inner Mongolian People's Publishing House (posters about and for national minorities) and the Sports Publishing House in Beijing (posters devoted to sports and physical education). During the Cultural Revolution, poster production was largely decentralized to the provincial or even municipal publishers. In the 1980s and 1990s, the predominance of the Beijing and Shanghai establishments eroded and other publishers took over, such as the Sichuan People's Publishing House and the Hubei Fine Arts Publishing House. Although posters are still being produced today, their heydays are over. Television and commercial advertising now reign supreme in China too.

Collecting, exhibiting and publishing

The IISH did not actively collect Chinese posters until the late 1960s. Items arriving together with an archive or collection were simply kept at the Institute. In 1966 China started to export large numbers of posters, hoping to propagate the ideology of the Cultural Revolution. Maoist organizations and the multitude of leftist bookstores around that time disseminated much of this material in the Netherlands as well.

The first part of the IISH collection came about via these channels. These posters were of course specimens regarded by the Chinese as suitable for export, often in export versions with captions in French, German and English. The IISH collectors were selective and aimed to use visual material to document the most important political themes.

In the 1980s some of the gaps started to be filled. Collections arriving at the IISH included more 'old' posters, and 'old' inventories were purchased from a few leftist bookstores prior to clearance. Around this time the IISH increased contacts with the Sinologist Stefan Landsberger, who was conducting PhD research on poster propaganda from the period following the Cultural Revolution.

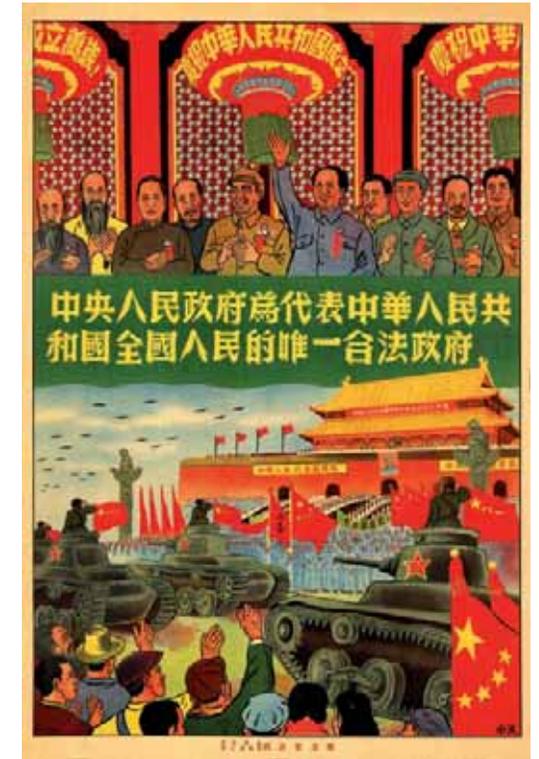
In the course of his research Landsberger had accumulated a collection of approximately 700 posters, mainly from the late 1970s and early 80s. In 1995 he entrusted this collection to the IISH as a standing loan.

The IISH and Landsberger continued working together, gathering a large, representative collection that conveyed the scope and diversity of the medium and publicizing it among both a specialized and a general public.

The public edition of Landsberger's PhD thesis *Chinese Propaganda Posters: From Revolution to Modernization* appeared in 1996. The book has been reprinted and translated and has become a reference work in the field. That same year the IISH organized the exhibition *The Chairman Smiles in Amsterdam*, featuring Russian and Cuban posters in addition to Chinese ones and eliciting considerable public interest. In 1998 a larger selection of Chinese posters was exhibited at the Groninger Museum, entitled *Paint It Red*. Presentations on a medium that was new at the time (Internet) reached a still broader public. The web versions of '*The Chairman Smiles*' and '*Stefan Landsberger's Propaganda Poster Pages*' rapidly became enormously popular and were used extensively in education and for research. They also gave rise to a wealth of contacts with other collectors and experts.

In June 2008 the largest-ever exhibition of Chinese posters from the IISH Landsberger collection – *China in Posters – The Dreamt Reality* – opened at the Kunsthall in Rotterdam. This exhibition coincided with the launch of the new website <http://chinese posters.net>, which in the years ahead will be expanded to include the complete poster collection, a gallery of highlights, web exhibitions, related images and information, such as artists' biographies, a bibliography and a selection of texts on Chinese art, propaganda and posters.

The combined IISH-Landsberger collection now comprises over 3,500 items. Current themes have been gathered, such as information about AIDS and SARS, appeals for aid to victims of floods and earthquakes, and the campaign for the Beijing Olympics (2008).



The central people's government constitutes the only legitimate government of all the people of the People's Republic of China Zhongyang renmin zhengfu wei daibiao Zhonghua renmin gongheguo quanguo renminde weiyi hefa zhengfu
Parade on the occasion of the proclamation of the People's Republic of China on Tian'anmen Square in Beijing, 1 October 1949. Mao stands above, fifth from the right, with members of his first government, including Zhu De and Song Qingling.
Designer unknown, ca. 1950
Size: 78.5x54.5 cm. Call number: E11/968

毛主席給我們的幸福生活

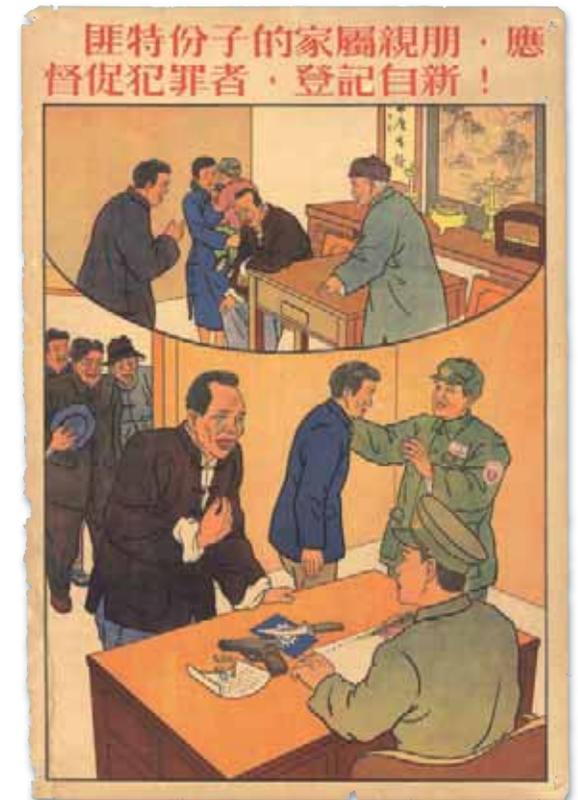


幸福生活

In addition to gathering more posters from the 1960s and 70s, we have obtained hitherto unknown material that often remained concealed for years in China because of the rapidly changing political realities: yesterday's heroes could be tomorrow's rogues... The collection of posters from 1949 to 1966 has grown the most, from the establishment of the People's Republic until the Cultural Revolution. This material, which was automatically considered suspect in China since 1966, was completely unknown in the West and was not examined by researchers. Accordingly, in authoritative publications, Chinese poster propaganda often appeared to have begun around 1966. Fewer in number and rarer still are the recently acquired posters from the period of the Japanese occupation (1937-1945).

Increases in political freedom and economic affluence in China have coincided with a lively trade in propaganda posters. And thanks to the rise in tourism and interest on the part of the West, many foreigners are participating in this trade. Well-known antique markets in China abound with propaganda posters, in most cases poor reprints, as well as increasing numbers of new 'old'-style designs, which are sold as 'real old' to gullible tourists. The Internet is inundated with such products, which of course irritate purist collectors. Researchers, on the other hand, watch with fascination how China comes to terms with its turbulent past.

Below: **Family members, relatives and friends of criminal secret agents, you must supervise and urge criminals to register and turn over a new leaf!** Feite fenzide jiashu qinpeng, ying ducu fanzuizhe, dengji zixin!
Fear of sabotage and espionage by former members of the Nationalist Party is kindled, and used against anyone who was 'on the wrong side' during the civil war.
 Designer unknown, ca. 1950
 Size: 78x54 cm. Call number: E15/512



Left: **Chairman Mao gave us a happy life** Mao zhuxi gei womende xingfu shenghuo
A new spacious home, a radio set, abundant and good food and three healthy children: the happy workers' family of the early 1950s. Xin Liliang, the designer, was known for his commercial film posters in the 1930s.
 Xin Liliang, 1954, March
 Size: 78x53 cm. Call number: E16/269



Stamp out the flames of war, save the peace!

Pumie zhanhuo, zhengjiu heping!

A Korean woman with children, on the run from an American airplane. In this war, the South is supported by the USA, the North by the Soviet Union and China. Until the armistice in 1953, an estimated one million Chinese die in battle

Designer unknown, 1952, September

Size: 78x54 cm. Call number: E14/988

Prosperity brought by the dragon and the phoenix

Long feng cheng xiang

The Great Leap Forward in industry and agriculture is often pictured with traditional symbols: the dragon (China) and the phoenix (good governance). In this campaign China aims to increase production by means of revolutionary fervor - but using questionable methods.

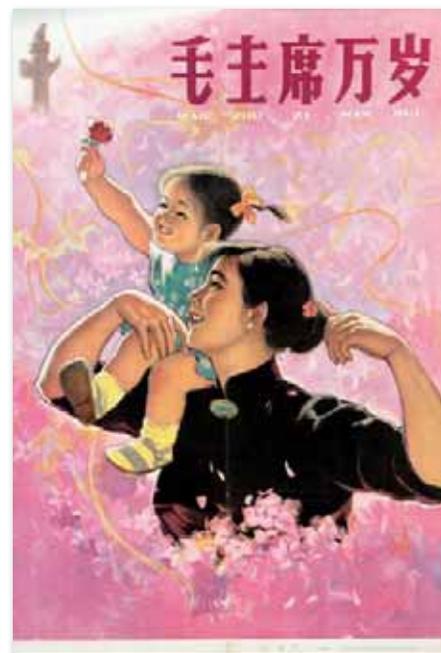
Jiang Shu, 1959, February

Size: 77x53 cm. Call number: E16/340

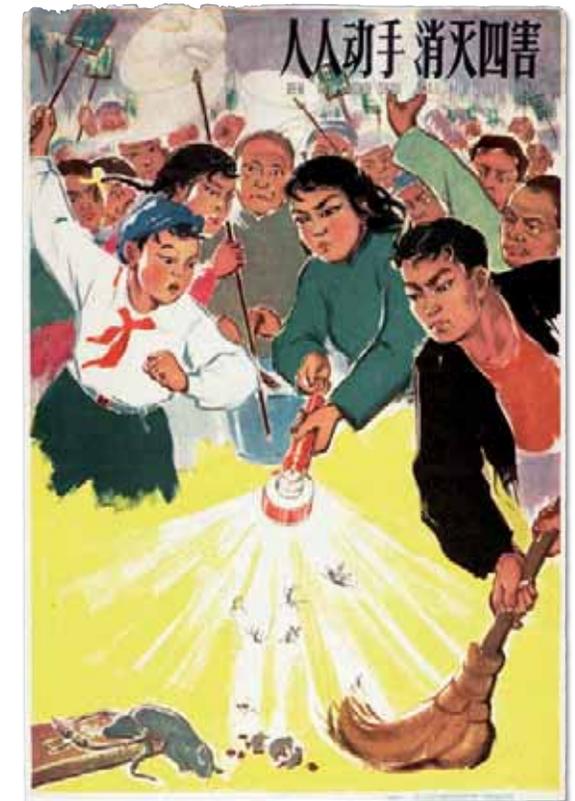




Above: **Fully engage in the movement to increase production and to practice economy to set off a new upsurge in industrial production** Guangfan shenrude kaizhan zengchan jieyue yundong xianqi gongye shengchan xin gaochao
 Engineers and technicians take over the construction of industry after the years of the Great Leap Forward. A year after this poster is published they are sidelined again, as the Cultural Revolution is unleashed and Mao Zedong Thought becomes the only knowledge permitted.
 Ha Qiongwen; Qian Daxin; Zhou Ruizhuang; Yang Wenxiu, 1965, April
 Size: 3 x 77x53 cm. Call number: E15/127-129



Left: **Long live Chairman Mao** Mao zhuxi wansui
 A famous poster that will cause great problems for the designer during the Cultural Revolution: why did he not depict Mao? And why give prominence to such an elegant, bourgeois woman, instead of showing an ordinary worker?
 Ha Qiongwen, 1964, January
 Size: 76.5x53 cm. Call number: E12/605



Right: **Everybody get to work to destroy the Four Pests** Renren dongshou xiaomie sihai
 A poster for the campaign to 'Kill the Four Pests', directed against flies, mosquitoes, rats and sparrows. These are unhygienic, or eat food that is meant for human consumption. But sparrows also feed on insects, like locusts, that become a real plague once the sparrows have been exterminated.
 You Longgu, 1960, March
 Size: 77x53 cm. Call number: E16/358

Above: **Advance victoriously while following Chairman Mao's revolutionary line in literature and the arts** Yanzhe Mao zhuxide geming wenyi luxian shengli qianjin

At the height of the Mao worship, Mao appears as radiant sun, high above the masses. The dancing figures below left and right are from the revolutionary model operas developed by Mao's wife Jiang Qing.

Designer unknown, ca. 1968

Size: 76.5x154 cm. Call number: E13/632-4



Below: **We will definitely free Taiwan** Yiding yao jiefang Taiwan

After the Communist victory and the proclamation of the People's Republic, members and supporters of the Nationalist Party flee to Taiwan and proclaim a separate republic. An export version of this poster, with subtitles in English, French and German, is very popular in the West. It decorates many students' rooms, together with the portrait of Che Guevara.

Red Eagle Corps of the Air force (Nanjing), 1971, January

Size: 53x77 cm. Call number: E12/613

Next pages: **The commune's fishpond** Gongshe yutang

Peasant painters from Huxian are propagated as examples of the innate genius of the people. In reality, these amateur artists are helped by professionals who have been sent to the countryside to 'learn from the peasants'. This is one of the most famous Huxian peasant paintings.

Dong Zhengyi, 1973

Size: 53x77 cm. Call number: E13/353

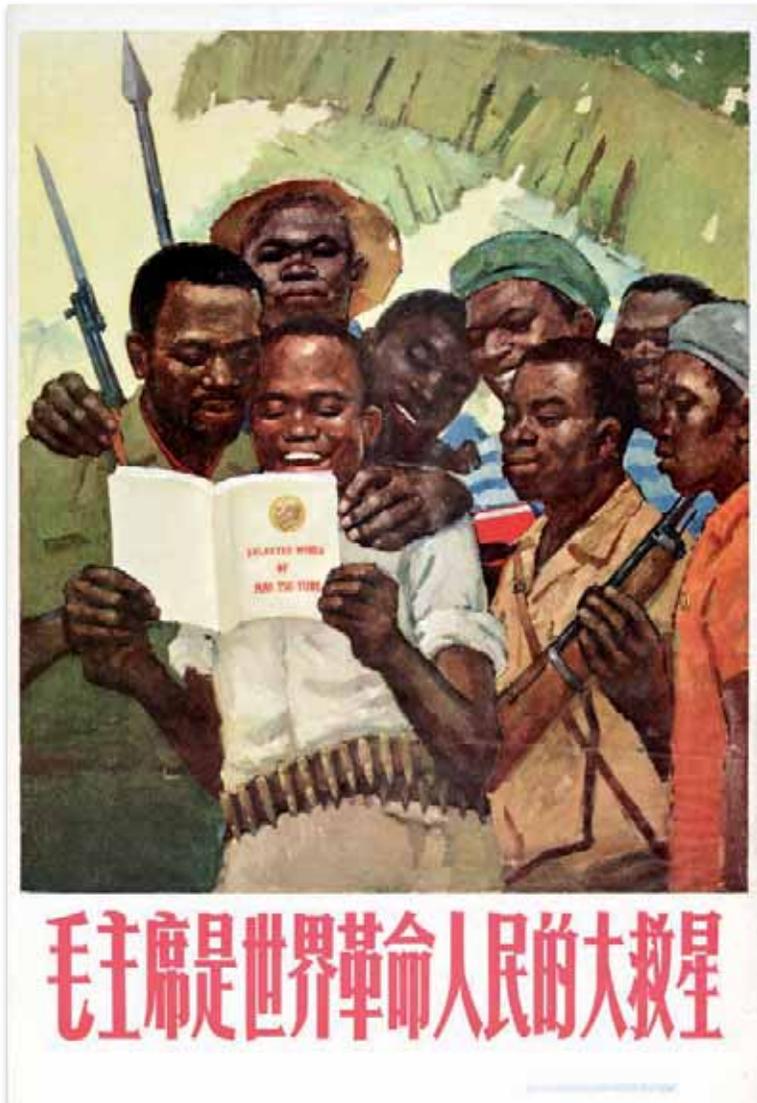




THE COMMUNE'S FISH POND

L'ETANG DE POISSONS DE LA COMMUNE

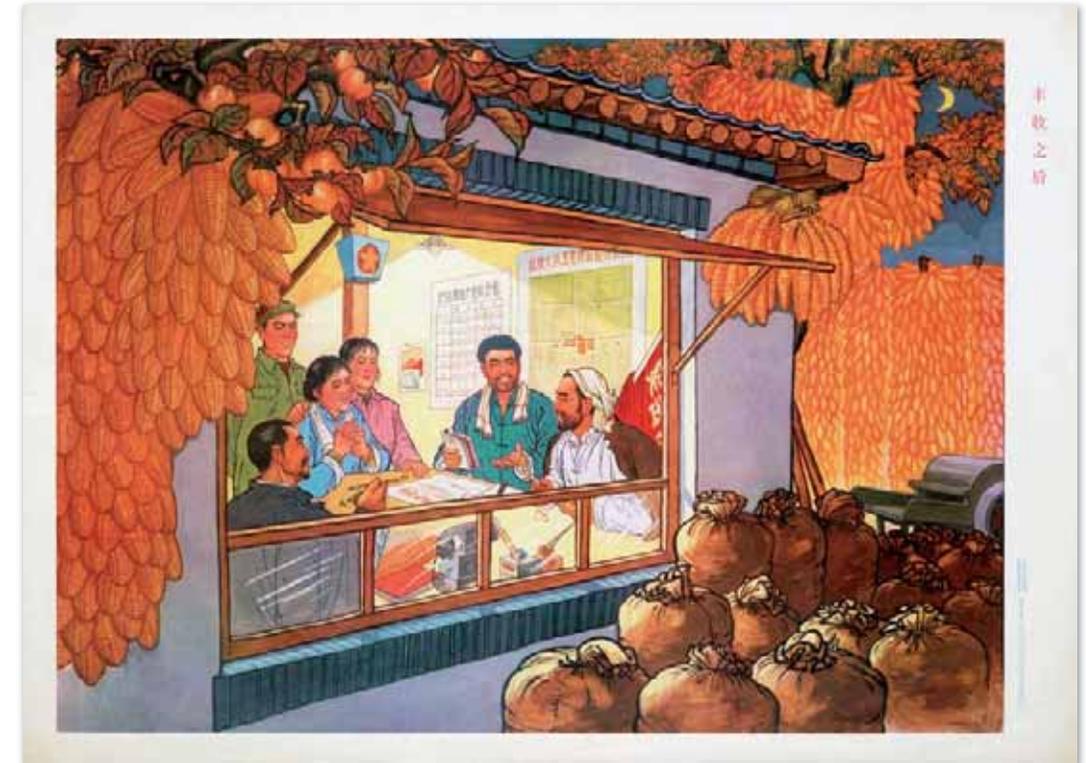
IM FISCHTEICH DER VOLKSKOMMUNE



Chairman Mao is the great liberator of the world's revolutionary people Mao zhuxi shi shijie geming renminde da jiuxing
 China supports revolutionary movements in Africa, and exports Mao Zedong's publications for inspiration
 Designer unknown, 1968, April
 Size: 77x53 cm. Call number: E16/339

Firmly grasp large-scale revolutionary criticism Zhuajin geming da pipan
 Factory workers shout phrases from the Little Red Book to a stage where 'rightist' managers are forced to stand, sometimes for hours, to be accused, insulted, and sometimes beaten.
 Designer unknown, 1969
 Size: 78x104 cm. Call number: G1/957

After the bumper harvest Fengshou zhi hou
 Another Huxian peasant painting. The leaders of a production brigade discuss the successful harvest.
 Liu Zhigui, 1974, July
 Size: 53x77.5 cm. Call number: E13/932





The red electromagnetic wave brings good news

Hongse dianbo chuan xixun

Work on the improvement of the farmland, roads and irrigation channels continues through the night. During a break, the workers are treated to a propaganda radio broadcast.

Liu Zhigui, 1974, August

Size: 53.5x77 cm. Call number: E12/742

Resolutely overthrow the anti-Party clique of

Wang, Zhang, Jiang and Yao Jianjue dadao Wang

Zhang Jiang Yao fandang jituan!

When Mao dies in September 1976, the struggle for his succession comes to a head. Jiang Qing, Mao's widow, forms what is called the 'Gang of Four' with three radical confidants. On 6 October 1976, the moderate Hua Guofeng, Mao's official successor, has the Gang of Four arrested. Jiang Qing is pictured below left.

Designer unknown, 1976, October

Size: 78x55 cm. Call number: E16/68



Foster a correct spirit, resist the evil spirit, resist corruption, never get involved with it Fuzhi zhengqi, dizhi waiqi, ju fushi, yong buzhan

Under Deng Xiaoping, the reform and opening up of the economy starts that has made China the economic power that it is today. Combatting corruption becomes a major policy for the Party. On the poster a civil servant refuses to accept liquor (bamboo wine) and cigarettes as gifts.

Jiang Jianzhang, 1983, January

Size: 77x53 cm. Call number: E13/413

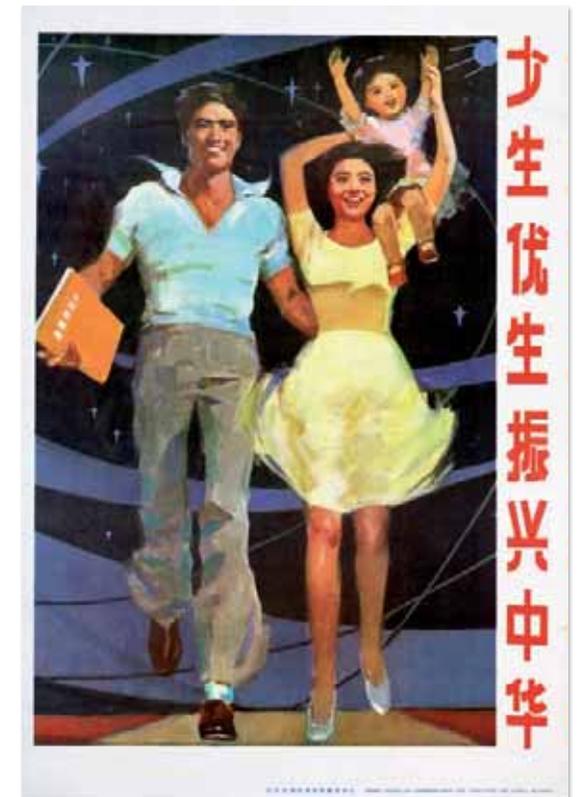


Less births, better births, to develop China vigorously Shaosheng yousheng zhenxing Zhonghua

In the 1980s, the One Child Policy is enforced, with more success in the cities than in the countryside. On posters like this it is usually girls that are shown, to indicate that they are worth as much as boys.

Designer unknown, 1987

Size: 77x53 cm. Call number: E13/871





I strive to bring glory to the mother country Wo wei zuguo zheng guangrong
 The gold medals pictured below are from the 1984 Olympic Games in Los Angeles.
 Wei Yingzhou, 1986, June
 Size: 77x53 cm. Call number: E13/85

Beloved comrade Xiaoping - The general architect Jing'aide Xiaoping tongzhi - zong shejishi
 Deng Xiaoping, the de facto leader of the People's Republic from 1978 to 1989, hates personality cults and for a long time manages to avoid being featured on posters. Only at the end of his life he is no longer able to stop it. In the background in this poster is a modern port, resembling Hong Kong.
 Lei Wenbin, 1994, September
 Size: 77.5x52.5 cm. Call number: E12/732



敬爱的小平同志——总设计师

More posters at the IISH

The IISH repositories contain over 110,000 posters. In addition to its own collection, the IISH manages the collections of the Press Museum and the Advertising Arsenal. The poster collection may be searched via <http://search.iisg.nl>. In addition to data, low resolution images appear there. Posters are available for exhibitions subject to various conditions. Reproductions may be ordered for publication purposes. For additional information, see <http://www.iisg.nl/service.php>.

Build a prosperous and cultured new socialist countryside
countryside Jianshe fuyu wenmingde shehui zhuyi xin nongcun

A new image of prosperity in the countryside, with material abundance, plenty of food, schools, libraries, hospitals and offices for media companies. The cardboard box on the left contains an IBM personal computer.

Du Jiang, 1997, February

Size: 106.5x229 cm. Call number: E15/892-3-4

Links

<http://www.iisg.nl>

- Homepage of the International Institute of Social History

<http://www.iisg.nl/asia>

- Information about the Asian collections and research projects

<http://www.iisg.nl/~landsberger>

- Stefan Landsberger's Chinese Propaganda Poster Pages

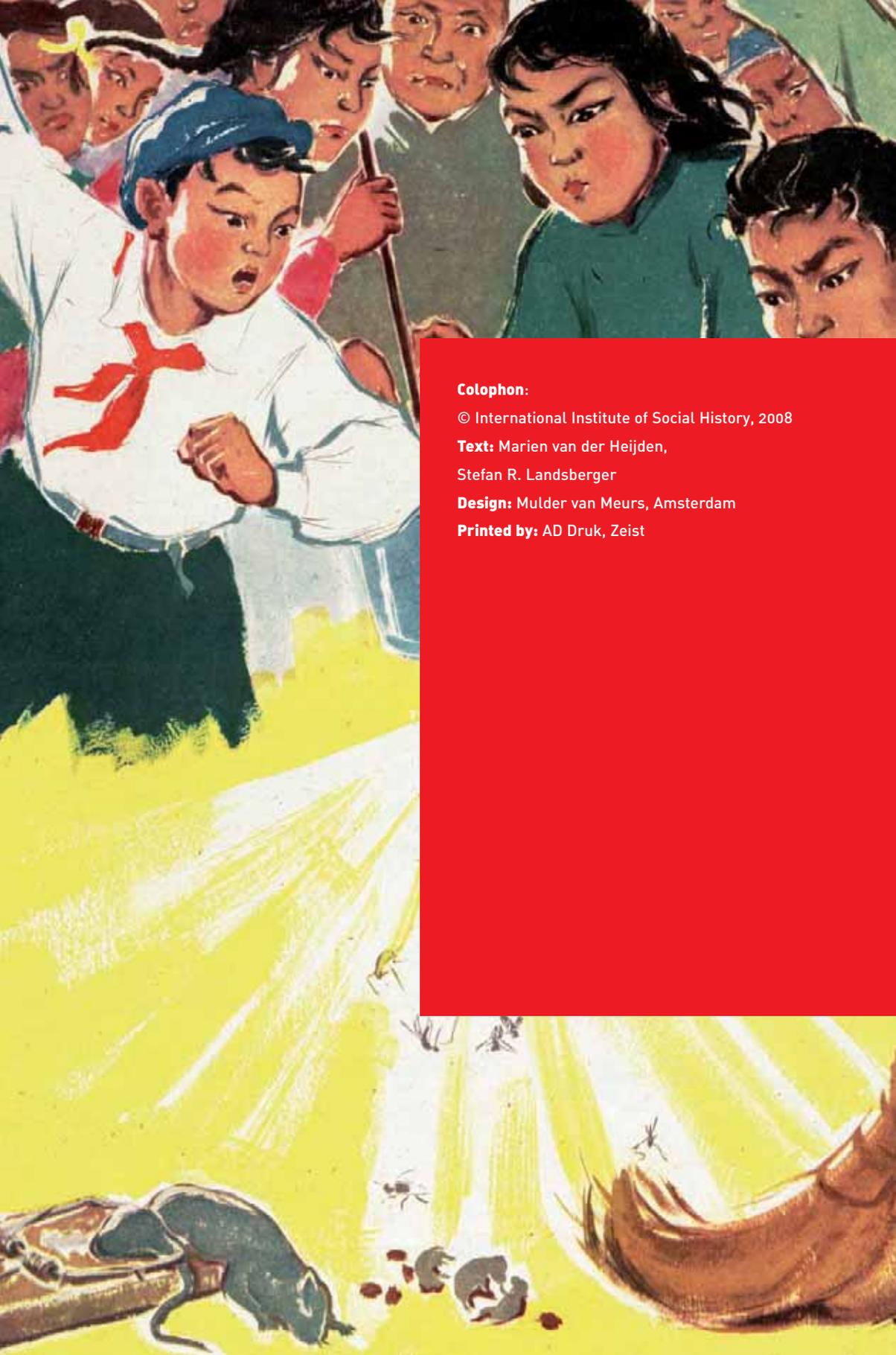
<http://chinese posters.net>

- Joint new website of IISH and Landsberger

<http://search.iisg.nl>

- Search engine for the IISH collections, including posters and other visual materials





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