

But What Did It Look Like?

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It is not an easy task to teach Chinese history to undergraduate and graduate students in such a way that something of the contents actually sticks. To begin with, History is often seen as boring by students. Many students moreover are frightened off and confused by the exotic names, and memorizing dates is just so last-century. In the many decades that I have taught contemporary Chinese history courses, the use of images has been a major method to serve as mnemonic devices to names and dates and to help bring past events to life. And this does not only apply to academic courses. Illustrating talks for the whole spectrum of possible audiences with images greatly helps to bring across ideas and concepts that otherwise would have called for long explanations and asides.

What did the past actually look like? In some instances, it looked just like in the images. One can talk all one wants about backyard furnaces, but showing them, preferably in action, makes it just that more vivid. Using pictorial evidence has also proven effective to dispel certain popular myths, for example the one that “in 1949, Mao forced the Chinese people to wear Mao jackets” (a sentiment expressed by various students over the course of many years). It is tremendous fun to present a series of images, from the late 1940s all the way up to the present, to show Chinese people wearing suits and qipao, pants and shorts, skirts and sweaters, and yes, Mao jackets. Time sequences of images showing sartorial styles in general tell a great deal about developments taking place in a society, in China and elsewhere.

The use of images in class serves a number of purposes. It gives students an opportunity to get an idea of what the past looked like, to make it come alive. But in the end, images can only be an approximation of historical reality; and these frozen moments of time leave out the smells, sounds, the heat or cold, the excitement or dread of the moment, etc. Many are framed for a specific purpose or to present a specific message; not a few have been doctored to put a spin on an event or to bolster a new interpretation of what happened once. Propaganda posters in particular present an ideal or future reality, from the perspective of the time and the conditions in which they were designed. The “truth”, in so far as it exists at any time anywhere, is not in the image, can and will not be found there. Images are records, reflections of the time they were produced in, reflections of the dreams, hopes, and desires of the people who ordered them made and of the people who produced them. What may be incomprehensible today might have made perfect sense decades ago.

Sources of inspiration

A number of people and events have inspired me greatly to use images in classroom situations and have helped me to develop and further hone my approach. Technological developments have made presenting images in the classroom also much more convenient. The cloud replaced the USB stick that replaced the cumbersome boxes of slides and the

projector; presentation software replaced the overhead projector.

Since the mid-1970s, I have been working on bringing together what is arguably the largest private collection (outside of China) of Chinese propaganda posters.¹ My fascination with totalitarian visual propaganda was at the root of this collecting mania. Chinese posters at that time were very affordable and not as politically suspect as WWII German or Italian propaganda. Soviet Constructivist or Mayakovskian propaganda, while aesthetically may be more significant, was beyond my modest means. And I must confess I liked Chinese propaganda posters and still do; some of the artwork is really first-class. For years, I pored over these posters (and discussed their contents with Chinese friends), first for research and PhD purposes, later just because it had become a habit, trying to find as many telling visual clues or significant details as possible. They showed a fantasy that was grounded in reality, however tenuously. As the collection grew, having an ever larger selection of images (primary sources!) under my fingertips to choose from for classroom purposes has been very convenient for teaching, but these posters have never formed the bulk of the presentation. To be truthful, when I started teaching my “visual approaches to contemporary history” classes in the late 1980s, I used (slides of) photographic images, some of them unearthed from the rich holdings of what used to be the Sinological Library at Leiden, some taken from books, to fill in the gaps that at that time existed in my own collection.

Secondly, the philosophy behind teaching Chinese history at Leiden University always has focused strongly on using images to explain abstract processes and concepts. One of my mentors, the late Erik Zürcher (1928-2008), was a proponent of this approach. In the later years of his academic life, Zürcher headed and lived for a project he had conceived, called China Vision. Its aims were to visualize all of Chinese history, ranging from the Five Elements and Three Bonds, to the spread of Buddhism, to the visual richness of the *Qingming Shang He Tu* as a map of medieval Chinese life, to the intricacies of court life under the Qing, all the way up to the present. For a period of five years, in the early 1990s, I was a China Vision project member, working specifically on devising a classification system for the thousands and thousands of images on slides that were at the heart of the classes that Zürcher would teach with great success. Because of a number of legal and organizational obstacles, the fame of China Vision has never spread widely beyond a few European countries. Many Leiden Sinology alumni still fondly remember the ‘slides classes’ they attended.

Another source of inspiration has been the British journalist John Gittings. While stationed in Hong Kong in the early 1970s, John had the brilliant insight to start a Chinese Visual Aids Project. With this he intended to make elements of daily Chinese life accessible and tangible to students. At the time, it was unthinkable that students actually would have a

chance to ever go to China in person. For the project he went out, in Hong Kong and wherever in China he was able to, to buy ordinary daily life stuff that the Chinese were surrounded with. The items included posters, Little Red Books, clothing, kitchenware, Lei-Feng-style sneakers, toys, red underwear, etc., similar things that Wu Xuefu included in his wonderful collection *Chinese Stuff*.² Gittings' project ceased at some point. The posters are now under the care of Harriet Evans, at the University of Westminster (London), and their original number has been added to considerably over time. Somewhere at Westminster there still must be file cabinets that contain selections of what John acquired way back when.

Using images

Should images support (illustrate) the historical/chronological narrative or should they drive the lecture? There is no straight answer to this question, as it depends on the type of lecture/class one teaches, the audience, and the information that needs to be shared. A lecture can be structured around one or a few images (as illustrations), which allows for a deeper analysis of the topic; it can also focus on a visual analysis, on the ways in which the image(s) are used to (re)present or broadcast an event. Or, it can be a "visual bombardment" in which the narrative merely links the consecutive images and plays a minor supporting role. Erik Zürcher was convinced that the latter approach was most effective; I use both methods.

Dong Xiwen's (董希文) and others', including Zhao Yu (赵域) and Jin Xiangyi (靳尚谊), take on the 'Founding of the Nation (*Kaiguo dadian* 开国大典)', is a good starting point to discuss elite struggles, the rewriting of history, and the process of remaking the visual record. The earliest version of the painting, finished by Dong in 1953, had Gao Gang in it, but then he goes missing. After his purge, he is replaced by a potted chrysanthemum.



In the 1972 version, Liu Shaoqi, who had come under a cloud during the Cultural Revolution, and others who had fallen foul of Jiang Qing, needed to be painted over, or moved in the line-up. After the Cultural Revolution ended, many of leaders seen in the original were reinstated in subsequent versions of the painting under Zhao and Jin's direction.



One of my favorite riffs is this: comparing interiors, consumption patterns, housing, etc., using the following two images. Using presentation software allows for arrows and other visual effects that will be lacking in what follows.



The first image is Xin Liliang's (忻礼良) 1954 poster, 'Chairman Mao gives us a happy life (Mao zhuxi gei womende xingfu shenghuo 毛主席给我们的幸福生活)'. It provides a bright and colorful representation of a worker family that has moved into a spacious, danwei-provided housing unit. Mao's official portrait, a so-called 'two-ear' Mao by Zhang Zhenshi that would be omnipresent from 1952-1963, takes pride of place. The calendar on the wall, with a dove-of-peace, shows a 'red-letter day', i.e., a Sunday, or a day that is free; the vase of flowers on and the books in the cabinet, the knitting/sowing on the chair in the lower right-hand corner, and the ball and hobby-horse suggest leisure and family life. The family owns a clock and a radio, representing modern technology. The mother wears a modern *qipao* and all

family members wear leather shoes, except the eldest son who wears trainers. The dinner that is served is abundant: *sicai yige tang*, the four dishes and the one soup that presently is referred to by Xi Jinping as the ideal size of a banquet for officials. The past is represented by a formal black-and-white photograph of the grandparents on the cabinet. Contrast this with the following.



This is Chen Jiren's (陈纪仁) 1973 poster 'At home (Jiating (家庭))'. What has always struck me in this image is its grayness, its bleakness; it lacks all the fun (and color) that Xin's poster has. The radio and the clock are still there, as is the calendar showing a 'red-letter day'. But, remarkably for sure, Mao's image has disappeared and the marriage certificate has taken its place. The flowers have been replaced by a thermos and a set of drinking glasses. The family wears cloth shoes, again with the exception of the eldest son who wears trainers. All are engaged in productive activities: reading, drawing, and mending. There is nothing personal left in this scene.

Similar things can be done with a sequence of posters of the Great World Entertainment Center (上海大世界) in Shanghai.

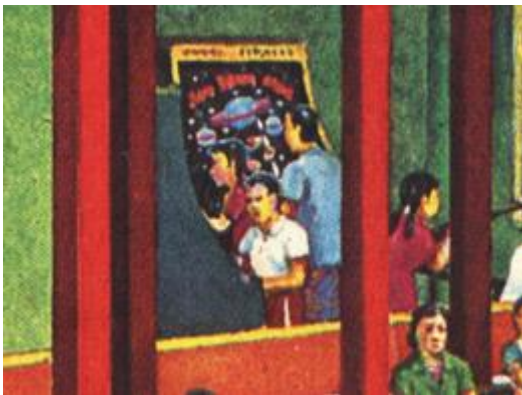
Produced in different eras, each of these posters provides an insight in the time of their genesis; more details can be found on this page <https://chinese posters.net/themes/great-world-shanghai.php>. Huang Shanlai's (黄善赉) 1957 poster, for example, contains a slogan on the balcony above the main seating area in Mao's calligraphy reading 'Let a hundred flowers blossom, weed out the old to bring forth the new' (Baihua qifang tuichen chuxin 百花齐放, 推陈出新).



Zhang Yuqing's (章育青) 1966 poster shows how, on the eve of the Cultural Revolution, art and entertainment already have been politicized. On the main stage traditional acrobatics are performed, but most performances in the small rooms on the galleries have a political theme or are based on Jiang Qing's Model Works, including the ballet/opera 'The Red Detachment of Women', and a performance dedicated to the virtues of 'The Good Eighth Route Company of Nanjing Road'.



Zhang produced another version, around 1989 (below), without any political slogans, but with a pop band playing, soft drinks being sold, and arcade machines. Compared to the earlier posters, the numbers of visitors are considerably smaller.



Using images in the digital age

Paradoxically, it has become more difficult to design image-driven lectures, even though in our present society the image has become the medium for the message, to paraphrase Marshall McLuhan's famous observation. Potentially useful and interesting images increasingly are off-limits because of copyrights and intellectual property restrictions. Obtaining permissions to use them is time- and energy consuming. The medium of the propaganda poster also is on the decline in China. Although urban China has been plastered with Chinese Dream posters from 2013 onwards, these only exist in digital form, on the website run by the China Civilization Office and the CCP Central Propaganda Department (讲文明树新风公益广告, Practice culture, establish a new practice public service advertisements).³ They are of spectacular quality, many in high-resolution, and can be downloaded as often as one wants.

While trying to avoid copyright issues over printed matter as much as possible, other forms of propaganda have emerged that can be used for teaching. The State Council Information

Office and the CCP Propaganda Department have embraced digital techniques to spread their messages over a multitude of platforms in the form of video clips. Collecting them calls for closely following Chinese government sites and downloading them on sight (as they may have disappeared the next day). Some are on YouTube, others on YouKu, others are on designated URLs, and others circulate on WeChat/Weixin. Their lengths range from between 15 seconds to five minutes or more. Some are subtitled, many are not; this requires some additional translation work on behalf of the instructor in case the audience is not familiar with spoken Mandarin. Experience shows that these video clips also have an appeal for non-Chinese audiences. *Shisanwu*, the 'commercial' about the 13th Five Year Plan, produced by the Fuxing Road Studio and released by Xinhua News Agency's Twitter account in October 2015, was much ridiculed in the West, in particular drawing attention because of the Aladdin Sane persona of David Bowie that played a role in it. Yet I am sure that many more people worldwide now know what the 13th Five Year Plan and its follow-ups are all about.⁴ In other words, it was highly successful. These clips are potentially under copyright regimes as well, but they seem to be distributed in order to be spread as much as possible, as the posters were, and as propaganda should be.

¹ Partly available on <http://chinese posters.net> and on <https://www.flickr.com/photos/chinese posters.net/>.

² Wu Xuefu 吴学夫, *Chinese Stuff* 中国东西 (Beijing: Wuzhou chuanbo chubanshe, 2008).

³ http://www.wenming.cn/jwmsxf_294/zggygg/.

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LhLrHCKMqyM>.