

# The city – where is it?

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Even before the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, posters formed a major plank in the communication and propaganda strategy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). It stands to reason that the CCP, in the run-up to grasping power in all of China after emerging from the remote rural strongholds where it had gained strength over more than 15 years, would devote considerable effort to swaying the population of the urban areas where it still had to establish its control. Paradoxically, this was not the case: while Party policy drifted away from its previous fixation on rural China and focused on the urban, propaganda very much remained inspired by and directed at the countryside. Urbanization was not seen as a desirable aspect of modernization or development. Coupled with explicit policies to restrict internal migration, the rural was presented as the more desirable.

As a result, the city-as-city only played a minor role in the hegemonic visualizations of the future. The many posters devoted to the spectacles of *Kaiguo dadian* (The founding of the nation) and the various 1 May Parades, or the song *Wo ai Beijing Tiananmen* (I love Beijing's Tiananmen) have less to do with Beijing as city than with the symbolic and political centre of the nation, which happened to coincide with Beijing's Tiananmen. Posters that featured the skyline of Shanghai never focused on Shanghai as a city, but rather as the stage where other events were performed, such as demonstrations against American imperialism in Southeast Asia. But then, of course, Shanghai itself grappled with problematic political issues, struggling to shed its (global) image of a decadent Oriental version of Paris.

With a few exceptions, the city only emerged as one of the *topoi* of propaganda after the depoliticization of society set in in the late 1970s. Zhang Yuqing's 'The bustling Nanjing Road in Shanghai' (1989) clearly serves as an illustration of the successes of the reform policies that were a decade old by the time this image was published. Showcasing the successful outward development of the nation through cityscapes became a recurring visual element in the posters of the 1990s. Note that the responsibility for producing these posters by then was no longer a central one, but had devolved to the communities (社区) themselves. One could see them as efforts at self-promotion rather than as propaganda images. With a few notable exceptions, the posters appearing during the SARS crisis of 2003 interpreted it as an urban event.

Hypothetically, there should be two major exceptions to this conspicuous absence of the (capital) city from propaganda. The first case coincides with the Great Leap Forward movement (1958-1959): the task of (re)building Beijing, in the form of the Ten Great Buildings, was seen as proof of and testimony to the successes of the first decade of CCP-rule. The second case takes place 50 years later, in the run-up to the Beijing Olympics of

2008. In both instances, the (capital) city represents the whole nation and functions as the stage where nationhood is enacted through grandiose architecture.

This visual essay will explore the representation of the city in Chinese propaganda posters through the six decades of PRC history. In doing so, it will become clear that the city-as-city never played a prominent role in poster design, as opposed to the city-as-backdrop, initially for political spectacles, later on for successful development and industrialization.

## **The first decade of the PRC**

The first decade of CCP-rule witnessed a concerted effort to educate the Chinese people in what the CCP-leadership had in mind for the nation. Propaganda posters gave a concrete expression to the many different abstract policies, and the many different grandiose visions of the future that the CCP 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, and this made them one of the most favoured vehicles to make government-directed communication more concrete and easier to understand. Because they were widely available, they could be seen everywhere. And they provided an excellent way to bring some colour to the otherwise drab places where most of the people lived. Posters thus were able to penetrate every level of social organization and cohabitation, and succeeded even in reaching the lowest ones: the multicoloured posters could be seen adorning the walls not only of offices and factories, but of houses, schoolrooms and dormitories as well. Most people liked the posters for their colours, composition and visual contents, and did not pay too much attention to the 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 *yuefenpai*, the commercial calendars and posters 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 a commercially attractive way. The images they made often were figurative and realistic, almost as if photographs had been copied into the painting. The aim of the idealized images they created was to portray the future in the present, not only showing "life as it really is," but also "life as it ought to be". They were painted in a naïve style, with all forms outlined in black, filled in with bright pinks, reds, yellows, greens and blues; black-and-white imagery was avoided as much as possible, as it turned off viewers. These works created a type of 'faction,' a hybrid of 'fact' and 'fiction,' stressing the positive and glossing over anything negative.

Although the CCP by necessity had focused its efforts during the Yan'an and Civil War years on the rural population, it was decided that the arts now also had to address the audience of urbanites who were still largely unfamiliar with, and potentially hostile to, the type of communism espoused by the Party. The CCP leadership turned to the Soviet Union for assistance in developing a style of visual propaganda that could be successfully targeted at city dwellers. Mao and other leaders were convinced that Socialist Realism, as it had been practiced in the Soviet Union since the 1930s, was the best tool for this. The bright colours and the happy and prosperous atmosphere that radiated from Socialist Realist works were seen as a

continuation of the essential features of the visual tradition of the New Year prints, while at the same time infusing the genre with new, modernized elements.<sup>1</sup>

Socialist Realism depicted 'life' truthfully and in its 'revolutionary development', not merely as an 'objective reality'. This tallied well with Party demands that art should serve politics.<sup>2</sup> In China, Socialist Realism would make it possible for "... Chinese artists to grasp the world of reality and to cure the indifference to nature which caused the decay of Chinese traditional art," while at the same time "it was the most popular form of art, which was also easiest to grasp."<sup>3</sup> Socialist Realism, then, became the proscribed manner of representing the future and it was responsible for the politicization (*zhengzhihua*) and massification (*dazhonghua*) of all art genres.<sup>4</sup>

In the period 1949-1957, many Chinese painters and designers studied Socialist Realism in Soviet art academies; the Soviet professors who came to teach in Chinese art institutes educated many others. Some of the artists who had been exponents of the commercialized 'Shanghai Style' that had been so popular in the urban areas – for example Xie Zhiguang and the prolific Li Mubai – also tried their hands at this new mode of expression. They and many others were given the opportunity – or in some cases were forced by the Party – to study real life, "to live with the people", and to spend time in factories and in the countryside, in order to produce images that were true to life. They did this with varying success, as their works were often criticized.<sup>5</sup>

Given this Soviet influence, it is important to note that careful analysis of available visual materials indicates that the inspiration the Chinese sought only covered artistic expression and did not include the subject matter of Soviet propaganda. In other words, Socialist Realism as a form of expression was studied, but the artists seemed to have forgotten to look closely at the contents of Soviet 'revolutionary development'. That should be seen as a glaring omission because the Soviet Union, the first nation after all that claimed to have succeeded in realizing socialism, had had a head-start in depicting the new *urban* socialist state, as the two examples below illustrate.

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<sup>1</sup> David L. Holm, "Art and Ideology in the Yanan Period, 1937-1945" (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Oxford, 1979), p. 316.

<sup>2</sup> Shao Dazhen, "Chinese Art in the 1950s: An Avant-Garde Undercurrent Beneath the Mainstream of Realism", John Clark (ed.), *Modernity in Asian Art* (Broadway: Wild Peony 1993), pp. 76-77.

<sup>3</sup> Ma Ke, "Jianguo shiniandai zhengzhi xuanchuanhua" [Political Propaganda Prints in the Ten Years Since the Founding of Our Country], *Meishu yanjiu* (1959:1), p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Interviews with Qian Daxin and Ha Qiongwen, Shanghai, 15 January 1998.

<sup>5</sup> Cai Ruohong, "Guanyu xin nianhuade chuanguo neirong" [On the creative contents of new New Year prints], *Renmin meishu* (2) (April 1950), p. 22. Zhong Dianfei, "Cong jinniandai nianhua zuopin kan nianhuajiade 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), p. 28. Shi Lu, "Nianhua chuanguo jiantao" [Self-criticism of New Year print creation], *Renmin meishu* (2) (April 1950), p. 31.



Image 1  
 Designer unknown  
*What the October Revolution has given to working and peasant women*  
 Gosizdat, Moscow, 1920



Image 2  
 Gustav Klutssis  
*Civilized life - productive work*  
 Ogiz-Izogiz, Moscow/Leningrad, 1932

In the image on the left, the woman points to a library, a workers' club, a school for adults and a 'house of mother and child', constructions that are part and parcel of advanced Soviet urban development. Here, they serve as indications of the tangible results of the revolution and as signifiers for urbanization. The image on the right calls for civilized living and productive working, behavioural traits that are called for in workers and, judging by the constructivist background of the image, are closely linked with modern urban surroundings.

Chinese posters do not provide such explicit links between development and urbanization, even though the working class formed a fertile ground for visual propaganda after 1949. Basically, two issues had to be addressed in the messages directed at them. The first was the creation of class-consciousness. By the time of the founding of the PRC, there were only some 1.4 million workers employed in what could be termed as the modern industrial sector. Despite their small number, they were to be imbued with the idea that they were the vanguard of the revolution, the group that had been exploited to such an extent in the past that it had become the most revolutionary. The second issue was to educate them about their responsibilities in building up a state industry. This was all the more necessary as huge numbers of people from the countryside, most of them first generation industrial workers, moved to the cities to enter the workforce. By 1957, the number of workers had risen to some eight million.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the stress on industrialization, not all posters were limited to the activities surrounding it. Tradesmen like construction workers, bricklayers and carpenters, in short,

<sup>6</sup> Marie-Claire Bergère, "China in the Wake of the Communist Revolution: Social Transformations, 1949-1966", Werner Draguhn & David S.G. Goodman (eds), *China's Communist Revolutions - Fifty Years of The People's Republic of China* (London, etc.: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002), pp. 106-109.

those people who were involved in changing the way Chinese cities looked, also were turned into subject matter. On the one hand, designers did not shy from acknowledging the usefulness of the 'advanced Soviet example', although image 3 does suggest slavish imitation by rebuilding the Moscow White House on Chinese soil. But most of the other building activity situated in urban areas as featured in posters (Image 4) was restricted to raising factories, not dwellings. And yet, the message these images presented was twofold: first, of course, it showed the hard labour that was changing the face of the nation, but secondly, it provided glimpses of what the new, modernized and urbanized China would look like.



Image 3  
Designer unknown  
The Soviet Union is our example  
*Sulian shi womende bangyang*, 1953

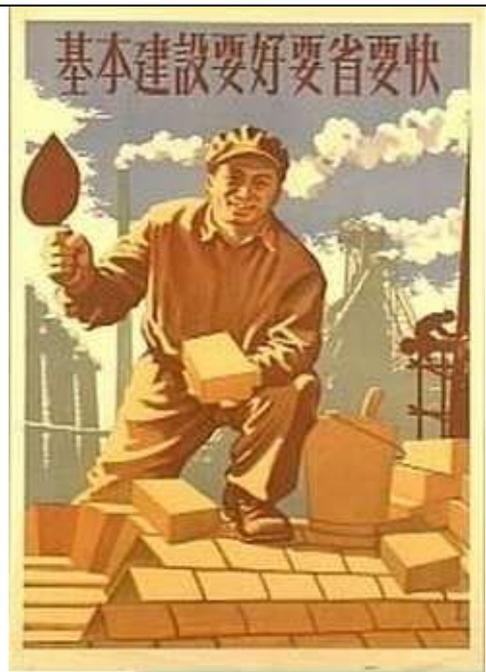


Image 4  
Tao Mouji  
Better, more economical and faster basic  
construction  
*Jiben jianshe yao hao yao sheng yao kuai*  
Huadong renmin meishu chubanshe, 1953



Image 5  
Xie Zhiguang; Shao Jingyun; Xie Mulian  
Moving into a new house  
*Banjin xin fangzi*  
Huadong renmin meishu chubanshe, 1953



Image 6  
Xie Zhiguang  
A morning off  
*Jiaride zaochen*  
1954

On the other hand, the postered urban realities of images 5-6 are presented and obviously accepted as a given, without any attempts to imbue them with revolutionary significance, aside from the addition of political iconography as in image 5. The images tell more about

social conditions (the presence of a radio and the number of children, for example) than about city life itself. The worker's family of image 5 has just moved into its new home in the *danwei* (work unit), with the wider contours of communal living visible through the window. While the city hardly seems to merit the interests of the poster designers, they lavish considerable attention to the great (material) life that awaits the workers in the work unit. Image 6 shows private entrepreneurship in the streets of Shanghai (?) and the relative material wealth and spending power of a worker's family.



Image 7  
Monument to the People's Heroes



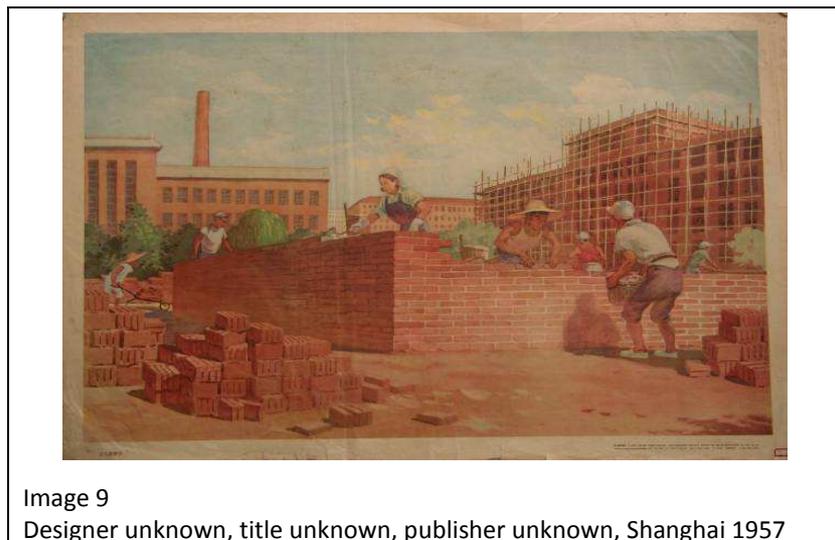
Image 8  
Beijing Railway Station

In short, the visual record for the first decade of the PRC gives no clue about the revolutionary city. There are no posters showing the various stages of (re)construction that Tiananmen Square underwent in the period 1949-1958 to reach its current size of 44

hectares, where a million people can assemble.<sup>7</sup> No posters were designed devoted to the construction of the Monument to the People's Heroes on the same Square (1949-1958, image 7).<sup>8</sup> And most surprisingly, no posters were published about the preparations for and actual work on the Ten Great Buildings that were completed in 1959 as an urban –and more specifically Beijing– component of the Great Leap Forward (1958-1960). There are numerous designs and artists' impressions of these actual constructions (of which image 8 is but one), but little else.

## The Ten Great Buildings

The preparations for the mass project designed to construct the Ten Great Buildings in less than a year's time to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the founding of the PRC started in September 1958.<sup>9</sup> The structures consisted of the Museum of Chinese History, the Museum of Agriculture, the Military Museum, the Cultural Palace of the Nationalities, the National Art Gallery, the Beijing Railway Station, the Great Hall of the People, the State Guest House, the Hotel of the Nationalities and the Hotel of Overseas Chinese. Comparable to the construction fever surrounding the preparations for the Beijing Olympic Games in the period 2001-2008, the project "... transformed the old Beijing into a new city by radically altering its orientation and appearance".<sup>10</sup>



The construction of the Ten Great Buildings was a major historical event that not only transformed a city (Beijing), but also the outlook of many of those involved, as well as the careers of great number of those who participated. Let's not forget that the *political* career of the relatively moderate former Vice-Premier and CPPCC-chairman Li Ruihuan took off

<sup>7</sup> Wu Hung, *Remaking Beijing — Tiananmen Square and the Creation of a Political Space* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), pp. 91-95, 102-103.

<sup>8</sup> Chang-tai Hung, "Revolutionary History in Stone: The Making of a Chinese National Monument", *The China Quarterly* (2001), pp. 457-473. Wu, *Remaking Beijing*, pp. 24-36

<sup>9</sup> Based on Wu, *Remaking Beijing*, pp. 108-116. Jianfei Zhu, "Beijing: Future City", Hongxing Zhang & Lauren Parker (Eds.), *China Design Now* (London: V&A Publishing, 2008), p. 138

<sup>10</sup> Wu, *Remaking Beijing*, p. 109

once he was identified as a model carpenter (more specifically, as a ‘young Lu Ban’<sup>11</sup> who modernized carpentry techniques) who took part in the building of the Great Hall of the People.<sup>12</sup>

Given the importance that the Party leadership attached to the undertaking and the close personal attention it paid to the designs – even Mao himself chipped in during the discussions over the proposals –, given the involvement of six major architectural institutes and universities, 34 building companies and the more than 10,000 experienced workers, artists and craftsmen that were mobilized to complete the buildings before August 1959<sup>13</sup>, the absence of visual propaganda surrounding the project is simply baffling. On all levels, a scheme as grandiose as this would have fitted well with the prevalent Great Leap Forward rhetoric of going all-out for communism, of “working hard to make the country strong and to remake nature”. There certainly is no scarcity of posters produced at the time that urged people to construct backyard furnaces to produce more steel or grow ever bigger quantities of grain, giant fruits and vegetables. The Ten Buildings was a project that moreover included scores of ‘revolutionary masses’ actually involved in conquering the past and creating the new. Image 9 would have done well as part of a broader poster campaign aimed at mobilization (although in reality it was published too early and does not seem to be about building activities taking place in Beijing<sup>14</sup>). The hypothesis raised in the introduction, that a campaign like this would have been a great occasion to privilege the city in propaganda, thus can be rejected.

## The 1960s

More than in the preceding years, 1960s propaganda actually started to pay attention to the urban environment. Coupled with a struggle to provide the people with food in order to survive, the period was marked by a return to predictable proceedings and the prevalence of order. Again, serious building activities were featured – both metaphorically and in reality – to show that construction was back in the hands of the experts. The urban environment clearly was presented as a concrete result of revolutionary engagement, echoing the intentions of the Soviet poster shown in image 1. What was missing was the visible engagement of political interest with the built-up area, a result of the subtle depoliticization of society that unavoidably followed the hyped-up Great Leap.

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<sup>11</sup> Lu Ban (507-440 BCE) was a legendary carpenter and inventor who became the patron saint of builders and contractors. See Klaas Ruitenbeek, *Carpentry and building in late imperial China: a study of the fifteenth-century carpenter's manual Lu Ban jing* (Leiden: Brill, 1993).

<sup>12</sup> [http://www.chinavitae.com/biography/Li\\_Ruihuan/full](http://www.chinavitae.com/biography/Li_Ruihuan/full)

<sup>13</sup> Wu, *Remaking Beijing*, p. 113.

<sup>14</sup> Personal information from various sources.



Image 10  
Wu Yi; Guo Zhongyu  
Develop socialism at a high pace  
*Gao sudude jianshe shehui zhuyi*  
Shanghai renmin meishu chubanshe, 1960



Image 11  
Zhang Yuqing  
The new centre of the commune  
*Gongshe xincun tu*  
Shanghai renmin meishu chubanshe, 1961

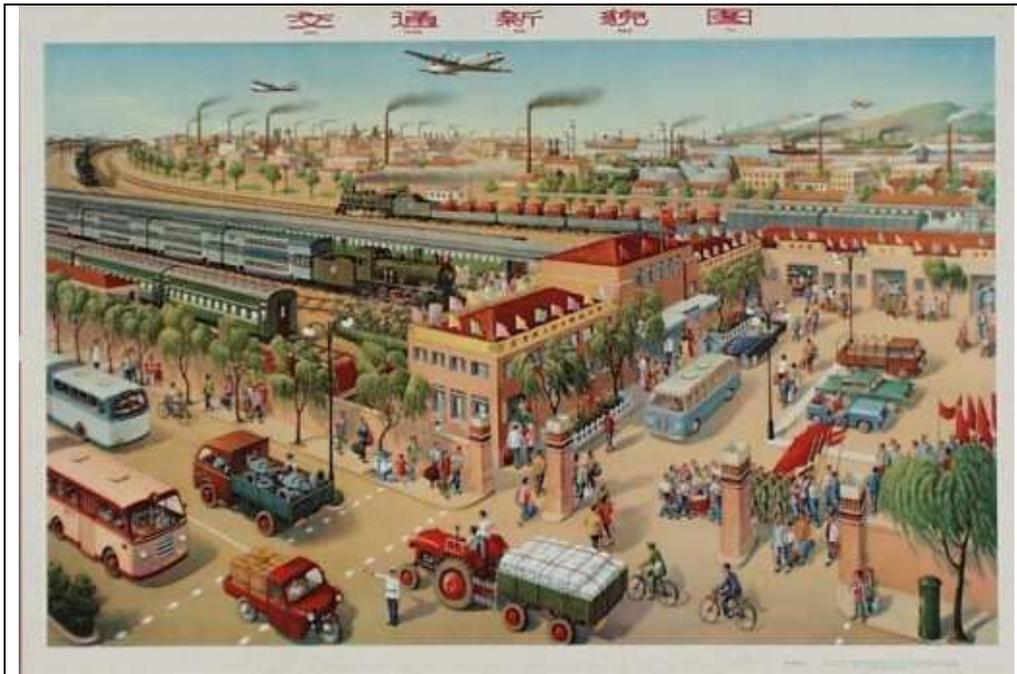


Image 12  
Zhang Yuqing  
The new look of traffic  
*Jiaotong xinmao tu*  
Shanghai renmin meishu chubanshe, 1966

Images 11-12<sup>15</sup> look very similar to the visual teaching materials as used in schools; they almost function like catalogues of development and modernity within existing or new (the commune!) urban settings, without the constricting and oppressive qualities of representing the capital. Life is orderly, there are no mass movements, no overbearing slogans, everyone is going about his or her own daily activities. If this is socialism, the message seems to be, it should look thusly.

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<sup>15</sup> It's worth pointing out that Zhang Yuqing (1909-1993), the designer of these two images, as well as other illustrations shown in this essay, was specialized in such panoramic representations. Many of his posters are New Year prints in the true sense: meticulously designed, they contain enormous amounts of visual information.



Image 13  
Zhang Yuqing  
An Anti-American wave of rage along the Huangpu river  
*Huangpujiangbiande fan Mei nuchao*  
Shanghai renmin meishu chubanshe, 1961

Image 13, situated on the bank of the Huangpu River in Shanghai, is of a more politically didactic and performative nature than the preceding images. As China was recovering from the Great Leap Forward famine in the early 1960s, an inner-Party power struggle was raging between the 'left' (revolution first, then prosperity) and the 'right' (economic reconstruction first, then revolution). While propaganda in general became more fierce and intense, it mainly addressed issues outside China itself: the struggle against international imperialism and the USA, against Soviet revisionism and the support for Vietnam. The choice for Shanghai in this poster seems obvious; there, the Art Deco-buildings along the Bund, the tangible remains of China's own humiliation under Western imperialism, serve as a counterpoint to the theme of the demonstration.

## Cultural Revolution

Although the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) started out as an urban campaign, the propaganda posters of the era focus primarily on people (Mao, of course, in huge quantities<sup>16</sup>; other members of the leadership, including Lin Biao; Red Guards; behavioral models; super-human proletarians smashing capitalist-roaders, etc), and, in the post-1969 period, on the nation as a rural Utopia in which harvests were bountiful and young urbanites were eagerly learning about revolution at the knees of the Poor and Lower-Middle Peasants.<sup>17</sup> A problem involved with researching the visual propaganda of the Cultural Revolution is that quite a lot of the material produced in the early phase clearly was of local

<sup>16</sup> Geremie Barmé refers to estimates that 2.2 billion copies of the official portrait had been printed, in *Shades of Mao* (Armonk, etc.: M.E. Sharpe, 1996), p. 7-8. This number excludes the innumerable other posters that were devoted to Mao (or his sayings).

<sup>17</sup> Huang Chengjiang, *Beidahuang zhiqing* [Educated youth in the great Northern wilderness] (Beijing: Zhongguo sheying chubanshe, 1998).

origin, produced for limited, local purposes. It has become clear now that even for these 'spontaneous', 'local' posters, the central levels often provided the examples.<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, it leaves us in a situation of never really knowing what existed when and where.



The “smashing-looting-beating” that marked the Red Guards’ actions against the built-up area, while very much present in the photographic and documentary evidence of the Cultural Revolution, by-and-large is absent from posters. Image 14 recreates the revolutionary reality where old street fronts were destroyed (as well as personal belongings smashed that have been requisitioned) and replaced with more revolutionary alternatives. Other urban activities that became synonymous with the era, such as the mass rallies on Tiananmen Square and elsewhere, and the numerous mass denunciation sessions, never made it to posters. A late and rather exceptional example of the mass character of the big-character-poster movement, simultaneously providing a glimpse of a city, is given in image 15, part of a series published in 1976 to commemorate the great achievements of the Cultural Revolution.

<sup>18</sup> *Geming da pipan baotou xuanji* [A selection of revolutionary great criticism mastheads] (Hangzhou: Zhejiang renmin meishu chubanshe, 1970). Shui Tianzhong, “‘Wenge meishu’ shi shenma?” [What is ‘Cultural Revolution Art’?] *Century Art History Study* (<http://cl2000.com/history/wenge/taolun/01.shtml>, accessed 7 April 2003)



Image 15  
 Cultural Revolution Collective Painting Creative Group  
 Bombard the capitalist headquarters  
*Paoda zichan jieji silingbu*  
 Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1976

Towards the end of the Cultural Revolution, after the 1976 Tiananmen Incident, a renewed, rather small-scale mobilization effort seemed to take place to support those associated with Mao. With Hua Guofeng anointed as the chosen successor and with popular sentiments increasingly in favor of policies that were antithetical to their own, people like Jiang Qing and her other Gang-of-Four members and sympathizers were increasingly forced on the defensive. Image 16, from August 1976, shows an Air force man, peasants and minority representatives answering the call to support Mao (and presumably Jiang and her followers) on the verge of entering the Forbidden City, with one of the Ten Great Buildings, the Great Hall of the People, on the right. Here, the countryside (the peasantry) returns to the city, and the city returns to the poster, but it is the city as the *capital*, i.e., the symbolic and political centre of the nation. This is the place where China's future will be decided upon. Thus, they have "arrive[d] at Chairman Mao's side", but to accomplish what?



Image 16  
Pei Changqing  
Arriving at Chairman Mao's side  
*Lai dao Mao zhuxi shenbian*  
Tianjin renmin meishu chubanshe, 1976

Once Mao died in September 1976, posters focused on mourning the Chairman and “carrying out his behest”, but for only a relatively short time.<sup>19</sup> This theme had to be cut short when designated successor Hua Guofeng took over power completely by arresting the Gang of Four and other opponents. After one month of official mourning, the propaganda apparatus had to scramble to spread a new message, intended to familiarize the people with their relatively unknown new leader.

## Modernization Days

From the perspective of propaganda poster contents, the city only really comes into play during the Reform and Modernizations era headed by Deng Xiaoping. While the adoption of the ‘Four Modernizations’ scheme in 1978 initially favored the countryside, its main beneficiary was the city, leading to a growing developmental gap between urban and rural areas. Deng’s urban proclivity is illustrated below.

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<sup>19</sup> This period only comprises the weeks between Mao’s actual death and the arrest of the Gang of Four.

多干实事，  
少说空话。

邓小平



chinaexpress.com

Image 17

Designer unknown

We should do more and engage less in empty talk-Deng Xiaoping

*Duogan shishi, shao shuo konghua-Deng Xiaoping*

Guangxi meishu chubanshe, 1992



chinaexpress.com

Image 18

Sun Yi

Special Economic Zones-China's great open door

*Tequ-Zhongguo kaifangde damen*

Renmin meishu chubanshe, 1987

The urban area presented underneath Deng's words is clearly identified with pragmatic, hands-on government, i.e., deeds rather than words (Image 17), intended as a reversal of preceding practice. It is a modern city with high-rise buildings and (rather empty) freeways very much inspired by Western examples. As such, it can also be seen as a prelude to the later policy of urbanizing the countryside in an attempt to stop the flow of labor from the interior to the metropolises on the Eastern seaboard. But more importantly and in stark contrast to the recent past, it is a city devoid of political symbols or activism played out in the streets. Similarly, China's Open Door policy (Image 18), inaugurated in 1977 by the hapless Hua Guofeng, is very much associated with the city, even though the Special Economic Zones that profited most from the opening-up policy started out as mere villages. Shenzhen is the most famous case in point (Image 19). The high-rise buildings visible through the newly opened doors have been designed in a modernist style (three wings, central elevator shaft) that was considered as advanced in China and became very popular and widely replicated in the early 1980s.



Image 19  
Tian Ying  
The Shenzhen amusement park  
*Shenzhen youlechang*  
Zhejiang renmin meishu chubanshe, 1985

But the Deng era is associated with other aspects of urbanity too. The depoliticization of society allowed for various new forms of economic activity, such as –small scale– private enterprise. In the early 1980s in particular, when the effects of the reforms were only slowly trickling down from the countryside to the cities, private entrepreneurship obviously needed to be promoted to appease the restive urban population while at the same time to absorb the ever more problematic numbers of un- or underemployed urbanites. Image 20 clearly puts this exciting new economic activity on the same level as urban modernization, with its modernist architecture in the background, but forms quite a contrast with the flower seller of image 6.



Image 20  
 Peng Ming  
 The age of smiling  
*Weixiaode shidai*  
 Lingnan meishu chubanshe, 1988

Image 21  
 Wu Xiangfeng  
 The return of Hong Kong, One Country-  
 Two Systems  
*Xianggang huigui, yiguo liangzhi*  
 Hubei meishu chubanshe, 1997

By the same token, given Deng’s accomplishments in returning Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty, the Special Administrative Region’s famous skyline has become entwined with the image of the ‘Great Architect’ of the reforms. Image 21, though, juxtaposes the computer-manipulated ‘images of China’ (the Tiananmen Gate building, the Great Wall and others) that became so popular in 1990s poster art with the Hong Kong office of the Bank of China, designed by I.M. Pei and the new Chinese Foreign Ministry building. With Deng’s image firmly anchored in the top half of the image, this conflation of (Chinese) tradition and (Western-inspired) modernity points to the CCP’s new interest in employing Chinese history in the new nationalism as it has been constructed after the Tiananmen massacre of 1989.

The urban orientation set in motion under Deng is nicely illustrated by two posters published to accompany the 2000 Census. The modern cityscape (image 22) somewhat echoes Hong Kong’s high-rise public housing schemes; it functions as an indication of the successes the reform and modernization efforts will bring in terms of city planning and hints at the speed with which glimmering CBDs will proliferate all over the place in the years to come. Even the countryside is promised its share of successful development in the form of urbanization, as indicated by the 2-4 storied housing dominating the village (image 23).<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> This development is well described by Anita Chan, Richard Madsen and Jonathan Unger in the last part of their *Chen Village – Revolution to Globalization*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009)

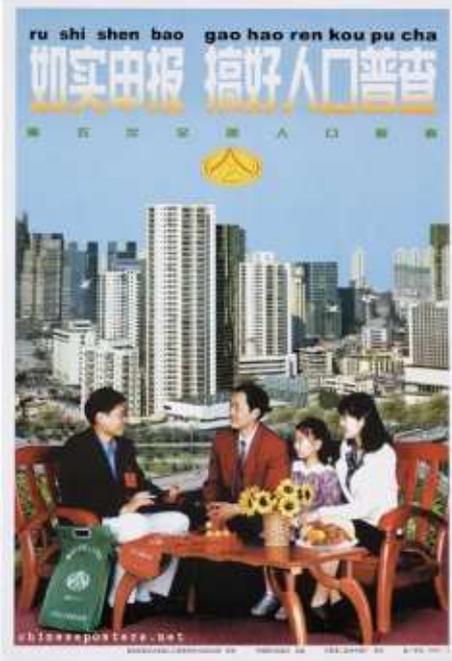


Image 22  
Office of the State Council Fifth Census Leading Small Group  
Report things as they really are, do a good job in the national census  
*Rushi shenbao gaohao renkou pucha*  
China Statistics Publishing House, 2000

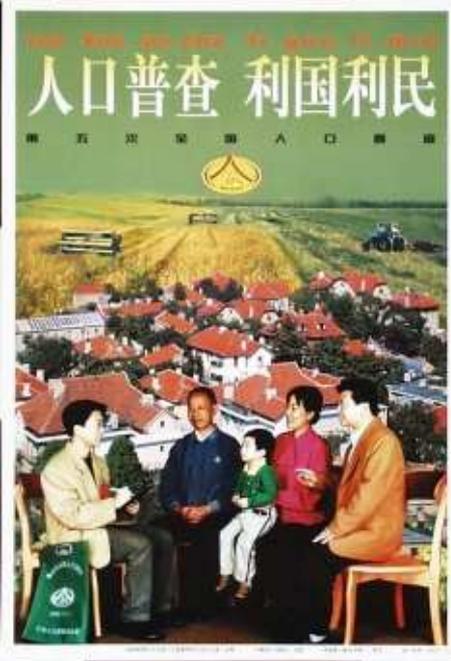


Image 23  
Office of the State Council Fifth Census Leading Small Group  
The national census benefits the nation and the people  
*Renkou pucha liguo limin*  
China Statistics Publishing House, 2000

## Post-Deng China

When we consider the Deng-era as the period in which visual propaganda's focus on the rural shifted decisively to the urban, it becomes self-evident that Deng's successors, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, persevered on the course set by Deng. Where Deng appropriated the Hong Kong skyline as an icon of the modernity and national unity that his rule brought, Jiang Zemin identified himself as the advocate for the reinvigoration of his native city Shanghai.

In the period immediately after the Tiananmen massacre, Jiang was still in the process of strengthening his position in the center of power by forcing out the old revolutionaries and bringing in the younger, highly educated technocrats from his own Shanghai/Jiangsu powerbase.<sup>21</sup> Under his aegis, Shanghai, a relative latecomer to the reforms, was made the 'dragon head' of the modernization and reform effort and its newly bustling commercial center, made concrete by its most famous shopping street, Nanjing Lu, was foregrounded to illustrate the glorious future that lay ahead (image 24).<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Bruce Gilley, *Tiger on the Brink—Jiang Zemin and China's New Elite* (Berkeley, etc.: University of California Press, 1998)

<sup>22</sup> Fulong Wu, "Place promotion in Shanghai, PRC", *Cities*, 17:5 (2000), p. 350. Wing Chung Ho, Petrus Ng, "Public Amnesia and Multiple Modernities in Shanghai – Narrating the Postsocialist Future in a Former Socialist 'Model Community'", *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 37:4 (2008), p. 384.

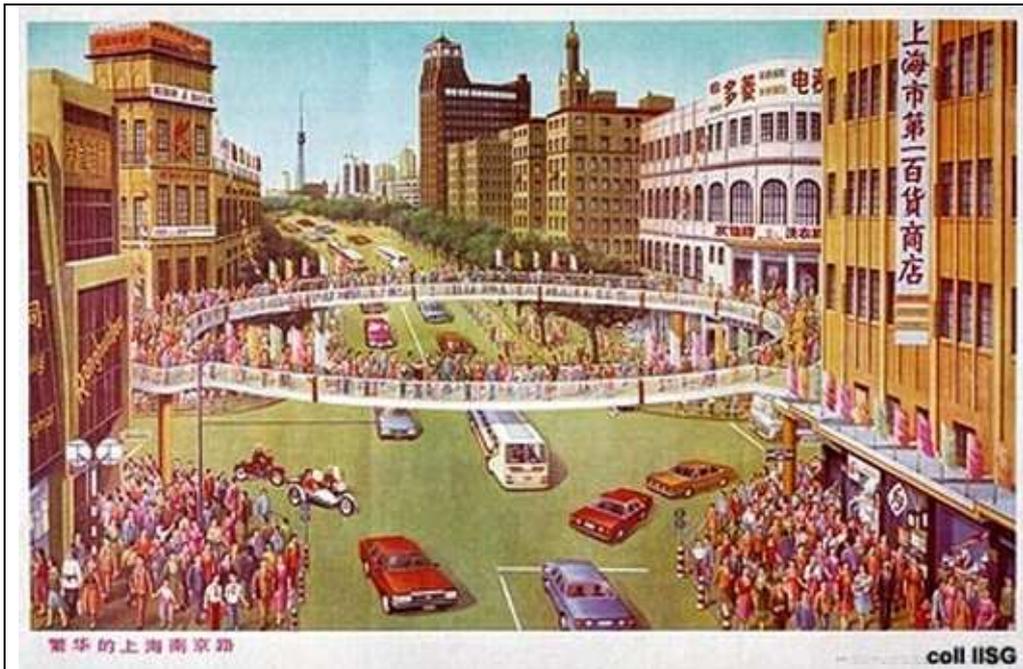


Image 24  
Zhang Yuqing  
The bustling Nanjing Lu of Shanghai  
*Fanhua de Shanghai Nanjing Lu*  
Shanghai renmin meishu chubanshe, 1990

On the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the PRC in 1999, Jiang once more proudly and unabashedly presented ‘his’ Shanghai to the nation and the world against the backdrop of the Pudong skyline, including the famous landmark of the ‘Pearl of the Orient’-television tower (image 25). In taking the limelight himself, Jiang reverted to the practice of leader worship that his predecessor Deng had discouraged strongly after coming to power. But looking at the representation of the city laid out behind Jiang, the changes that took place in the ten-year period between these two images have been staggering.<sup>23</sup> It is no longer necessary to spruce up old imperialist-inspired landmarks like the Bund or the historic Nanjing Lu. Instead, Pudong, a whole new urban district and testimony to China’s rise in the world, has come into being with an ample share of gleaming and reflecting fronts. In the same vein, the solid realities of modern city planning and –construction as exemplified in Shanghai has superseded the fantasies of the future that the poster designers of days gone by created in their art works.

<sup>23</sup> Ackbar Abbas, “Cosmopolitan De-scriptions: Shanghai and Hong Kong”, *Public Culture* 12:3 (2000), p. 779.



City propaganda again took a different tack after Jiang left to be succeeded by Hu Jintao in the early years of '00. Not only did State leaders once more disappear from visual propaganda with Hu's taking office<sup>24</sup>, the actual practice of propaganda poster production declined even further than it had during the preceding two decades. The main reason for this was the increased use of other, newer media for propaganda purposes<sup>25</sup>, including television and the Internet, coupled with a decision to produce less intrusive, *political* messages. Hence the intermittent but not overly loud stress on the formation of an ill-defined "harmonious society" that has become the hallmark of the Hu administration. A second reason can be found in the new ways in which such propaganda itself was produced and disseminated, and this has a bearing on a new organizational form found in urban areas: the community, or *shequ* (社区). Although the appearance of the *shequ* can be traced back to the late 1980s, Hu must be credited with the fact that he ordered them to be allowed a degree of autonomy from direct local government intervention in running their own affairs.<sup>26</sup> This decision is widely interpreted as not merely a form of government reorganization, but a process of deep reform with far-reaching consequences.<sup>27</sup> Thus, with the communities responsible for providing social and welfare services and governing themselves in order to be better able to respond to the new demands raised by the emerging market economy, it becomes clear that the responsibility for propaganda now has

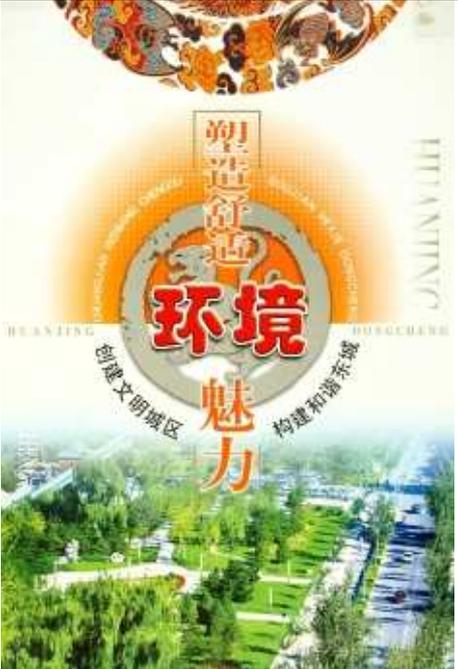
<sup>24</sup> With one known exception: Hu appeared in a minuscule photograph reproduced on a poster detailing the government's steps in combating SARS in 2003.

<sup>25</sup> Stefan R. Landsberger, "Harmony, Olympic Manners and Morals - Chinese Television and the 'New Propaganda'", *European Journal of East Asian Studies*, 8:2 (2009), pp. 331-355.

<sup>26</sup> Feng Xu, "Gated Communities and Migrant Enclaves: the conundrum for building 'harmonious community/shequ'", *Journal of Contemporary China*, 17:57 (2008), p. 637

<sup>27</sup> James Derleth, Daniel R. Koldyk, "The *Shequ* Experiment: grassroots political reform in urban China", *Journal of Contemporary China*, 13:41 (2004), p. 773

become decentralized as well. This is illustrated by the appearance of posters produced by municipal districts (*qu*, 区) as opposed to the municipal administration itself.

	
<p>Image 26          Designer unknown          Establish a cultured city, construct a harmonious Dongcheng - Development, keep in step with the times  <i>Chuangjian wenming chengqu, goujian hexie Dongcheng - Fazhan, jin'gen shidai bufa</i>          publisher unknown, 2004/2005</p>	<p>Image 27          Designer unknown          Establish a cultured city, construct a harmonious Dongcheng - Environment, create comfort and charm  <i>Chuangjian wenming chengqu, goujian hexie Dongcheng - Huanjing, suzao shushi meili</i>          publisher unknown, 2004/2005</p>

Images 26-27 are examples of this new development, publicizing two aspects (development and the environment) that appear to be much on the minds of the administrators of Beijing's Dongcheng district. Note that development is interpreted here as high-rise urbanization, considered to be a *sine qua non* for "keep[ing] in step with the times". The urban environment, a great concern for ever increasing numbers of urbanites all over the world, is credited by the Dongcheng administration with creating comfort and providing charm. The posters' meaning and intention is three-fold: On the meta-level, they call for the construction of a harmonious district in a cultured city, thus appeasing the higher levels of government; on the intermediary level, they show the district in all its environmental splendor and high-rise modernity, while at a subconscious level, they provide proof of good district governance.

Economic development, expressed in further urbanization and a further improvement of the living standards of the population remains a serious concern among Party and State leaders. It has become the government's and CCP's rallying cry that the people should attain a level of being 'relatively well-off' (*xiao kang*, 小康), and this state of material well-being is unavoidably linked to private home- and car ownership. Examples of propaganda, from the series *Spirit of the 17th Party Congress Propaganda Posters* published after the 17<sup>th</sup> CCP Congress in 2007, illustrate how this works and, more importantly, what it should look like.



Image 28  
 Wu Lei, Li Xiaoqian  
 The aim of the struggle is to let everybody attain moderate affluence  
*Fendou mubiao quanmian xiaokang*  
 Guangxi renmin chubanshe, 2007

Image 29  
 Lin Yi, Li Xiaoqian  
 Improve the lives of the people, construct harmony  
*Gaishan minsheng goujian hexie*  
 Guangxi renmin chubanshe, 2007

## Olympic Beijing

Much as been filmed, said and written about the extreme make-over that urban Beijing has had in the run-up to the 2008 Olympic Games, usually focusing on the construction of signature architectural designs (the Bird's Nest Stadium, Water Cube Natatorium, CCTV Building, Beijing International Airport Terminal 3), the demolition of old *hutong*-neighborhoods and the displacement of the original inhabitants.<sup>28</sup> As a mega-event, the preparations for the sports meet figured prominently in visual propaganda, although it should be noted that the switch of media used to carry visual propaganda – from print to broadcast –, a trend that has been discussed elsewhere in more detail<sup>29</sup>, found its completion here.

The remaking of the political and symbolic heart of the nation *and* the capital was very much part of the PRC's efforts to demonstrate to the world that China had arrived. In a way that could be compared with the Ten Great Buildings Project of 1958-1959, the Olympics were to showcase China's greatness, its modernity, the creativity and wisdom of its people, etc. But

<sup>28</sup> Just a few examples out of many will be mentioned here: Ou Ning's documentary *Meishi Street*, on the re-construction of Dazhalan (2006); Anne-Marie Broudehoux, "Spectacular Beijing: The Conspicuous Construction of an Olympic Metropolis", *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 29:4 (2007), pp. 383–399; Jörn-Carsten Gottwald, Niall Duggan, "China's Economic Development and the Beijing Olympics", *International Journal of the History of Sport*, 25:3 (2008), pp. 339 – 354.

<sup>29</sup> Landsberger, "Harmony, Olympic Manners and Morals", *passim*.

again, as in 1958-1959, the *actual* process of the modernizing make-over that Beijing underwent since it was awarded the Games in 2001, the *actual* mobilization of resources and people, has been almost completely absent from propaganda posters. This can not be attributed to a lack of propaganda efforts: practically every aspect of human behavior, from spitting and smoking in the street to learning English, from the clean clothes of the taxi drivers to the queues for busses, subways and trains, was didactically addressed in visual propaganda, printed or broadcast.<sup>30</sup> But the rebuilding of Beijing, the construction of the landmark buildings, roads, subways, etc. remained invisible. A possible explanation for this may be that, as opposed to the late 1950s, the workers actually involved in these construction activities were no longer volunteers whose enthusiasm needed to be whipped up, but migrant laborers who were paid for their efforts. There were Olympic Volunteers, to be sure! They actually were the hospitality workers and the gophers of the Games, interfacing with visitors, athletes, media representatives, organizers and events.

So where and how does the Olympic city feature in propaganda posters? Mostly in juxtapositions of the historical, 'eternal' China and the new image the Games had to present to the world, in other words, the juxtapositions of the Temple of Heaven and the Forbidden City on the one hand and the Water Cube and the Bird's Nest on the other, as in images 30-31. In line with the decentralization of the propaganda effort, many individual districts of Beijing came up with their own visual takes on the event; these districts included Dongcheng and Chaoyang. But none of these made use, or was allowed to make use, of images of the central Olympic structures – they belong to the nation.

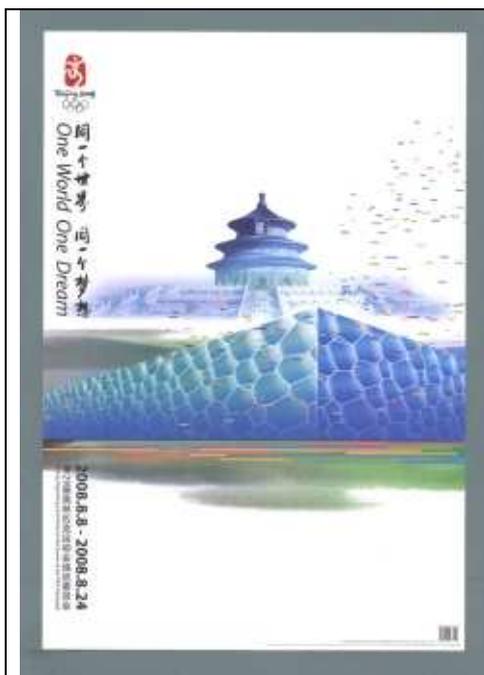


Image 30  
 Designer unknown  
 One World One Dream  
*Tongyige shijie tongyige mengxiang*  
 Beijing Organizing Committee for the  
 Games of the XXIX Olympiad, 2008

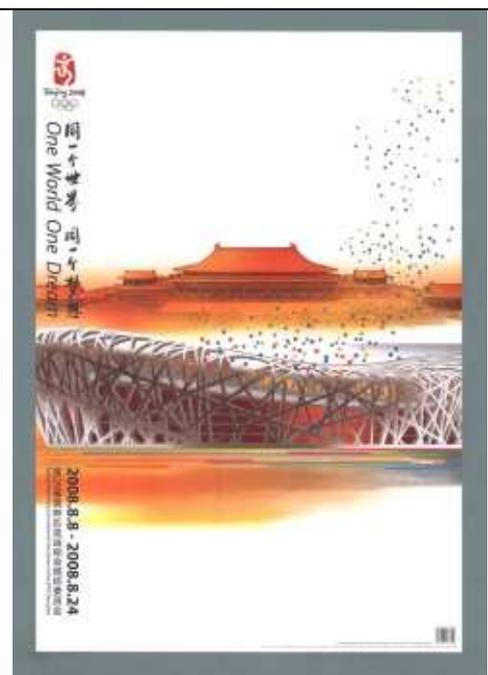


Image 31  
 Designer unknown  
 One World One Dream  
*Tongyige shijie tongyige mengxiang*  
 Beijing Organizing Committee for the  
 Games of the XXIX Olympiad, 2008

<sup>30</sup> See Jeroen de Kloet, Gladys Pak Lei Chong, Wei Liu, "The Beijing Olympics and the Art of Nation-State Maintenance", *China Aktuell*, 2008:2, pp. 7-35

Image 32 further illustrates the iconic qualities ascribed to the Olympic structures (the Bird's Nest in particular) by the Chinese themselves in their conflation with modernity (high-rise buildings) and internationalism.

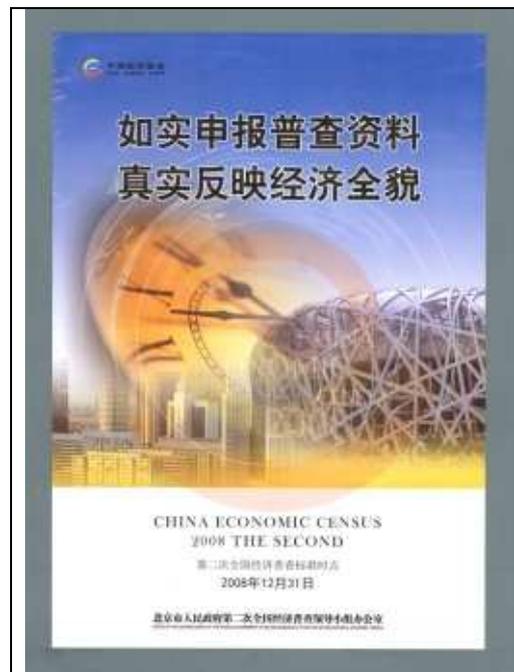


Image 32  
Designer unknown  
Report census data accurately, provide a realistic picture of the economy –  
China Economic Census 2008 The Second  
*Rushi shenbao pucha ziliao zhenshi fanying jingji quanmao - di'erci quanguo jingji pucha biao zhun shidian*  
Office of the Leading Group of the People's Government of Beijing Municipality for the Second Economic Census, 2008

## End notes

This essay has looked at the role the Chinese city plays in the propaganda posters that have been published in the past 60 odd years. On the basis of ongoing visual analytical research, it was postulated that the city-as-city never appeared in serious way as a signifier of revolutionary success or as an indicator of development. As hypothesized in the leading paragraphs, that the two major events in which city-building played a pivotal role, the Ten Great Buildings Movement of 1958-1959 and the construction of the Olympic City of Beijing would form an exception of this practice, this has not been borne out by the visual record. No 'campaign propaganda' has been published to support these events.

One explanation for the absence of the city may be found in the character of the urban work unit itself. Its structure was such that ideally, a unit member never needed venturing outside of its enclosing and protective walls. From the perspective of the *danwei*, there was nothing in the outside world worth looking for. Social space, structures and allegiances existed at the unit level, and there was no need to link up with the wider community. This ordering of

urban society has ceased to exist with the maturing of the reform and modernization measures. And while people nowadays no longer need to fall back on their units, the 'gated communities' of the new urban developments projects have taken their place.

A trend towards urbanization has been noticeable in the countryside. In an attempt to stem the flow of migrant labor to the metropolises in the East, the government has designed plans to restrict the expansion of large cities while encouraging the growth of small towns. In 2006, Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao bundled policies to "build a new socialist countryside" that seek to improve conditions for those who remain behind in order to reduce the pressures of urbanization.<sup>31</sup> For a long time, clear ideas have existed about what this urbanized countryside should look like, as in image 33. But as before, there is no 'clarion call' to create an urbanized countryside ... we are merely left with an impression of what the end result of the plans should look like. And that very much resembles the – Soviet – urban reality of the first image of this essay!



<sup>31</sup> Tony Saich, "The Changing Role of Urban Government", Shahid Yusuf, Tony Saich (eds), *China Urbanizes: Consequences, Strategies, and Policies* (Washington: The World Bank, 2008), p. 182