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To spit or not to spit – Health and Hygiene Communication through Propaganda Posters in the PRC – A Historical Overview

Abstract :

In this paper I will present various aspects and types of the health communication undertaken in the past six decades of the PRC. I will look at ideas about health and hygiene as they emerged in the late Imperial era, at examples of health propaganda in Republican times, and I will focus on the communicative practice of propaganda posters devoted to health themes as they have appeared in the People's Republic of China. Moreover, I will argue that the medium of the propaganda poster for health communication has slowly but surely fallen into disuse. The television commercial, or more specifically, the televised public service announcement, has taken over its place and function. Nonetheless, very recently the posters have re-emerged again.

Once the Party took control over China in 1949, education in health was stepped up. The propaganda poster, a mobilizational tool imported from the Soviet Union, was applied widely in these campaigns to explain abstract ideological principles, providing the people with the knowledge and expertise that were needed to achieve political goals, production quota or other results. However, posters never played anything but a supportive role and merely amplified visually what was conveyed through other media.

Despite the striking visual imagery supporting the various hygiene campaigns, their overall success over time can be debated. Injunctions against spitting in the street continued to appear regularly until the present, an indication that things may not have changed as much as we have been led to believe. The use of posters has been superseded by educational television commercials.

To spit or not to spit – Health and Hygiene Communication through Propaganda Posters in the PRC – A Historical Overview

In the late Imperial era and during the early years of the Chinese Republic, many reformist thinkers tried to fathom why Chinese were not respected by foreigners. One of these thinkers was Sun Yatsen, who was convinced that “competent governance of the body’s natural functions” was a “necessary condition for competent government”. As long as the Chinese were “lacking in personal culture”, they would not be respected by others. Sun and likeminded reformers called for an end to the practice of growing fingernails to an unseemly length, they advocated regular brushing of the teeth, criticized the practice of farting at will, and tried to educate the people that hawking and spitting either in the street or at home was simply “not done”. Keeping oneself tidy became part of a new style of personal self-management that was considered essential to show the world that the Chinese people had woken up.¹ The stress on health and (personal) hygiene remained an important aspect of raising the Chinese popular consciousness during Guomindang (GMD) rule in the 1930s and 1940s. Educational materials for various health and hygiene campaigns were published to teach people ‘modern’, healthy, hygienic and therefore respectable behavior.²

Posters as communication device

The most fundamental difference between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the GMD in their methods of social mobilization was that the CCP was more inclined

¹ John Fitzgerald, *Awakening China — Politics, Culture, and Class in the Nationalist Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998)

² Examples of such posters from the 1930s and 1940s can be found on the United States National Library of Medicine’s website, <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/exhibition/chineseantimalaria/gallery.html> and <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/hmd/chineseposters/index.html>

and capable at manipulating popular emotions.³ Before the People's Republic of China was established in 1949, the experiences the CCP had gained with mass movements in Yan'an had proven them to be very useful tools for change in a variety of fields, ranging from politics to production drives, literacy, health and hygiene campaigns.⁴ The complete arsenal of available communication media and methods, both indigenous and ones inspired by Soviet practice, and ranging from newspapers, handbills and leaflets, songs and poems, to skits and slogans, was applied to rouse the masses into action. The propaganda poster⁵, a mobilizational tool that had been imported from the Soviet Union, was applied widely in these campaigns. Initially taking the form of pictures that were painted on city walls and village houses, or on huge pieces of cloth, the rousing images later were published in printed form and distributed through work units and bookstores. Soldiers, workers and local people excelling in production or other commendable behavior served as models for these posters. They were easily recognizable by the population, making them eminently emulatable. Simple forms and lines and flat colors were used to depict them as realistic figures, with a sparing use of black.⁶

Posters that offered concrete examples of what the campaigns were intended to accomplish or combat helped to address the largely illiterate population. Posters functioned as educational tools to explain abstract ideological principles, providing the people with the knowledge and expertise that were needed to achieve political goals, production quota or other results. Posters also made it clear what specific behavior was desired, or what type of slogans the people needed to use in the course of an unfolding movement. In short, “[p]ropaganda posters, with their simple, lively forms and bright, powerful images, as well as their high volume printing and

³ Nianqun Yang, “Disease Prevention, Social Mobilization and Spatial Politics: The Anti Germ-Warfare Incident of 1952 and the ‘Patriotic Health Campaign’”, *The Chinese Historical Review*, v. 11, no. 2 (Fall 2004), 177

⁴ Charles P. Cell, *Revolution at Work – Mobilization Campaigns in China* (New York, etc.: Academic Press, 1977), 44-46.

⁵ All posters discussed and analysed in this article are part of the IISH – Landsberger Collections at the International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

⁶ Chang-tai Hung, *War and Popular Culture – Resistance in Modern China, 1937-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 263-266.

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.”⁷ However, posters never played anything but a supportive role and merely amplified visually what was conveyed through printed or broadcast media, through mass meetings and communal reading groups. Even so, they performed functions that interpreted, organized and confirmed the developments taking place.⁸

The New China

Once the Party took control over all of China, mass campaigns were unleashed on a regular basis until well into the 1980s. This ‘flow of campaigns’, organized both at the national and the local levels and in the rural and urban areas, addressed national, international, moral and social topics and was intended to strengthen the support for the Party, to deepen the understanding of its ideology and to promote economic production. The goals for most of the early movements were comparatively easy to understand.

The general education in health was stepped up after 1949. On the whole, the hygiene movements that provided this information reflected the philosophies embraced by the central leadership that not only hygiene, but also physical fitness in general was an element of the modernization agenda. Physical preparedness and well-being were seen as essential now that the Chinese had stood up and would no longer be bullied by others. It should not be surprising that already in 1950/1952, series of posters were published that chronicled the re-establishment of healthcare and sports governments systems and facilities.

Observing hygienic rules even came to be seen as patriotic. The eradication of

⁷ “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), p. 177.

⁸ Mark Luper, “Revolutionary Little Red Devils: The Social Psychology of Rebel Youth, 1966-1967”, Anne Behnke Kinney (ed.), *Chinese Views of Childhood* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1995), 324.

diseases and the public and private behavior or conditions that caused them was considered equally important as national construction, ferreting out counterrevolutionaries and class enemies, or making revolution, to establish the identity of New China. Although less confrontational than the campaigns against evil feudal landlords and enemies of the state, the more general aims and methods of this and later movements were much more difficult to get across. Their task was to combat centuries' old and no doubt tenacious ways of thinking about cleanliness and hygienic behavior. People were instructed to clean their houses, schools and places of work. They were to engage in personal hygiene practices every day. Spitting in the street, for example, already criticized by Sun Yatsen, remained a type of behavior targeted for eradication.

Women in particular were depicted as the ones responsible for the well being of the household. During the Patriotic Hygiene Campaign of 1952, for example, the posters that were intended to show various measures to improve hygienic conditions in domestic surroundings all featured women, whereas men were shown while engaging in typically male activities such as digging latrines.⁹ As part of the role children played as the true representatives of the new society, they were shown taking an active part in the Hygiene movement. As recipients of the program of compulsory education that was one of the accomplishments of the Party, they were eminently equipped to help the older generations understand what was happening in the New China, including their greater awareness of health and hygiene issues.

Specific poster design depended on the campaign aims and the message that needed to be conveyed. In the case of the inoculation drives that were organized after the beginning of the Korean War, bold designs with a clear, single message were produced. Hygiene education called for a more detailed and obviously more educational approach; in great detail, pests and their detrimental effects were presented. Both types of posters served a functional application; it is highly unlikely

⁹ Ruth Rogaski, "Nature, Annihilation, and Modernity: China's Korean War Germ-Warfare Experience Reconsidered", *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 61. no. 2 (May 2002), 381-415.

that they found their way to private homes for decorative purposes.

Superstitions

The CCP considered spiritual-mythical movements such as the *Yiguandao* (Way of Pervading Unity), *Jiugongdao* (Nine Temples Way) and *Xiantiandao* (Way of Former Heaven), all deeply rooted in tradition and with many adherents among the population, as potential troublemakers that could make use of dissatisfaction and insecurity to try and discredit the new regime and foment rebellion. But the spirit mediums, witch doctors and other self-ascribed healers and shamans not only formed a threat to public order but to public health as well, as the various ‘holy water incidents’ of the 1950s and early 1960s illustrated. The new government therefore set up various nationwide campaigns to ‘eradicate’ them. Aside from the political and counterrevolutionary threat that the CCP saw in these sects, due to their ties with the Nationalists and – especially during the Korean War – with alleged imperialist, American interests, superstitious beliefs about health, health care and healing did not mesh with the scientific approach the Party tried to spread. As a result, the contents of the propaganda posters used in the propaganda campaigns combined political, social and health topics, with dangerous superstition as the binding factor.¹⁰

Germ

The Patriotic Health Campaign of 1952 started after the appearance of “poisonous insects” in the winter of 1951-1952. American germ-warfare in North Korea had already been reported earlier, but in early 1952, the People’s Daily (*Renmin ribao*) explicitly linked these reports with the occurrence of domestic epidemics. In March 1952, eyewitness accounts confirmed the spraying of germs by Americans in Manchuria and Qingdao. This followed hot on the heels of the start of the ceasefire negotiations at Panmunjom that were to end the Korean War. From then on, official newspapers carried reports that offered more and more details about germ-warfare

¹⁰ Steve A. Smith, “Local Cadres Confront the Supernatural: The Politics of Holy Water (*Shenshui*) in the PRC, 1949-1966”, *The China Quarterly* 188 (2006)

having moved into China itself. Broken germ bombs were found, as were scattered pamphlets with flies and fleas on them; the shells were marked with phrases such as “U.S.TIME” and “BMBOBLEAFLET”, similar to those dropped in Korea. The reports did not confirm a connection between the local epidemics that took place and germ-warfare, but by deliberately blurring the differences between the two, the government wanted to encourage public hygiene and health work. Thus, the elimination of rats, fleas and flies, garbage removal, drinking clean water, not eating raw or cold food and preventive injections should be made everybody’s responsibility. When the germ attacks were confirmed, the Chinese leadership established a central committee for epidemic prevention and launched programs for anti-epidemic injections. Apart from a massive program of injections, all germ-carrying animals were destroyed, special hospitals for inflicted patients were designated and measures taken to quarantine inflicted areas. At the same time, the anti-epidemic policy took on a different character, one of a nationwide mobilization for social change. The two key components were: to get people in non-disease inflicted areas as deeply involved in the disease prevention movement as people in the inflicted areas so as to establish a routine state penetration in people’s daily lives; and to make people become accustomed to accepting state influence through a massive anti-epidemic campaign. By 1953, a complete institution of disease prevention had been established.¹¹

Although propaganda devotes most attention to the Chinese involvement in the conflict, a substantial number of posters explicitly stresses the essentially humanitarian aspects of the Chinese presence in Korea. As a potential indication of international proletarian solidarity, Chinese medics render services to Korean War victims and Chinese soldiers rescue Korean civilians victimized by the military conflict. Obviously, health themes have been used here to drum up domestic support for the military involvement in a foreign armed conflict.

¹¹ Rogaski, “Nature, Annihilation, and Modernity”; Yang, “Disease Prevention, Social Mobilization and Spatial Politics”

Pests and Snails

One of the most spectacular hygiene campaigns ever was organized in late spring 1958. It set out to eliminate the so-called Four Pests: flies and mosquitoes as carriers of disease, and rats and sparrows as destroyers of grain. Rats had been singled out already during the Korean War as sources of potential American contamination, but this time the people were mobilized to see to their complete destruction.¹² The large-scale mobilization of the movement is often seen as an overture for the Great Leap Forward (1958-1960).

Contests were held among enterprises, government agencies and schools in pest eradication. Non-material rewards were given to those who handed in the most tails of rats, or dead flies and mosquitoes, or dead sparrows. The movement became something of a sport and children jumped at the excitement of these activities; they turned out to be eminently receptive to the calls for mobilization. Eyewitnesses recalled how they, as youngsters, would bang pots and pans so that sparrows would not have the chance to rest on tree branches and would fall dead from the sky from exhaustion.¹³

The campaign as a whole turned into a disaster, if only because the leadership realized too late that the destruction of pests actually upset the ecological balance. By eliminating sparrows, worms and other crop threatening insects were given free play. For this reason, hunting sparrows was replaced by catching bed bugs, but this was not until 1960.

The various schistosomiasis eradication campaigns targeting snails that were organized in 1955-1959 to wipe out 'big belly' disease generally were seen as having been more successful. Locally produced, tailor-made posters and other visual materials were designed to contribute to 'snail awareness'. Later, the effectiveness of

¹² Rogaski, "Nature, Annihilation, and Modernity", 393-394, 408.

¹³ Roderick MacFarquhar, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution, vol. 2: The Great Leap Forward 1958-1960* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1983), 21-24

these awareness campaigns in the eradication of schistosomiasis was discredited. It was one thing to teach potential victims that schistosomiasis could be prevented by eliminating snails; providing information about carriers and transmission of the disease, or about preventive strategies was an altogether different matter.¹⁴

Barefoot Doctors

During the Cultural Revolution era (1966-1976), health communication carried a very low priority in the massive propaganda effort that unfurled to bring about ideological purity and uniformity. An exception must be made for a particular section of materials devoted to health and hygiene communication, i.e. the posters dedicated to the so-called 'barefoot doctors' that worked at the lowest agricultural level. When the rural communes first were set up during the Great Leap years, health care was organized in health stations at the commune level. The people employed by these stations, usually women, were part-peasant, part-doctor. As they wore no shoes most of the time, they became known as barefoot doctors, a term that was made official in 1968. In 1965, Mao argued that the urbanites, who constituted only 15% of the population, were the main beneficiaries of the existing system of health care, whereas the large peasant population had no access to medical services or medicine. To reverse this situation, it was decided that one-third of the medical workers and administrators from the cities should start working in the rural areas to improve hygiene. As a result, large numbers of sub-standard medical staff or those health professionals who had political problems were dispatched to the countryside. As barefoot doctors, they were to "... give vaccinations; control infectious diseases; collect information on epidemics; and provide simple medical treatment and temporary rescue." In the early 1970s, barefoot doctors were also given an active role in the implementation of the family planning policy then in force.¹⁵ The break-up of the barefoot doctor system

¹⁴ Joshua S. Horn, *Away With All Pests – An English Surgeon in People's China: 1954-1969* (New York, etc.: Monthly Review Press, 1969), 94-106; Rogaski, "Nature, Annihilation, and Modernity", 408; Cell, *Revolution at Work*, 54; Ruotao Wang, "Critical health literacy; a case study from China in schistosomiasis control", *Health Promotion International*, vol. 15, no. 3 (2000), 269-271.

¹⁵ Kwok-sing Li (ed) & Mary Lok (transl), *A Glossary of Political Terms of the People's Republic of China* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1995), 25-26.

began in 1981 when they were given the opportunity to sit for a national examination. Those who passed were upgraded to ‘certified village doctors’. Those who failed became village health aides. By 1985, the term ‘barefoot doctor’ not only ceased to be used, but the overall rural health care situation deteriorated as well.¹⁶

The posters extolling the establishment of the barefoot doctor system served two functions. On the one hand, they showed that the government was trying to breach the developmental gap between city and countryside by providing basic healthcare to the rural areas. But at the same time, they took extraordinary pains to illustrate how relevant the peasants’ knowledge was when it came to the curative qualities of traditional herbal cures. This also served the nationalistic agenda that has always been at the core of the revolutionary enterprise.

Reform Era

In the early 1980s, healthy behavior and personal hygiene were once again equated with a sense of having culture, a quality much sought after at the time. Posters devoted to health and hygiene issues reemerged. Moreover, due to the changes that were taking place in the political arena and the economy with Deng Xiaoping having taken over, there was a general feeling that from that point on, things would be handled differently. The expectation that the nation was embarking on a course that was new in all aspects was strengthened by the spate of posters produced in those years that showed people (usually women and children) cleaning windows. It almost seemed to indicate that everything – including politics – would become clean, more transparent, more visible, thus leaving the trauma of the Cultural Revolution behind. Another indication of the fact that normalcy had returned was provided by the reemergence of posters produced by the Chinese Red Cross.

The use of symbols pointing to this type of political hygiene was quickly replaced by

¹⁶ Sukhan Jackson, Liu Xili, Song Jinduo, “Socio-economic reforms in China’s rural health sector: Economic behaviour and incentives of village doctors”, *International Journal of Social Economics*, vol. 23 no. 4/5/6 (1996), 412

the more traditional and tested way of addressing health issues. Posters showing children washing their hands almost became a standard subject of the educational posters aimed at inculcating Socialist Spiritual Civilization, a movement that gained importance from the mid 1980s onwards. Another type of unhygienic behavior that was addressed frequently in propaganda posters was spitting in public, but still without apparent success: even in the run-up to the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing, the fight against hawking and spitting has continued unabated.

HIV/Aids

Since the 1990s, a new awareness has emerged in China about the threat that HIV/AIDS poses to the population. Increasing numbers of people are identified as carrying the HIV virus. According to recent official figures (2003), some 840,000 persons have tested positive for HIV, and about ten percent of them have progressed to AIDS. Others, however, insist that the actual number of those infected might be twice as high. Although HIV still is concentrated among intravenous drug users (51 percent) and people who have become infected through unhygienic blood donations in the 1990s (21 percent), the pattern of transmission of the virus is beginning to change. HIV infection by sexual transmission in particular was sharply on the increase, particularly among women. A number of reasons can be identified for this development. First, a general lack of awareness about sex existed in China. Education and information about prevention measures was lacking. Secondly, the number of intravenous drug users, sharing needles, was growing. Thirdly, commercial sex was on the rise in China, while condom use remained low. Other factors included unsafe medical conditions and procedures and inadequate measures to guarantee blood safety. The huge numbers of peasants moving to the cities looking for work also posed a serious problem. This meant that the potential dangers of infection with the virus had to be communicated as effectively as possible.

The SARS-crisis in 2003 made China even more aware of the dangers and risks of contagious diseases. Aside from taking various concrete measures to structurally

improve prevention, identification and treatment of HIV/AIDS, the government over the past decade or so has decided to step up its HIV/AIDS-related educational work. This has taken place on a number of levels and ranged from propaganda drives to a widely publicized meetings of State leader Hu Jintao Premier Wen Jiabao with HIV-positive patients on 1 December, International Aids Day. An example of the HIV/AIDS awareness drive was a poster campaign published as a collaborative project by the Ministry of Health and the Durex Company, a worldwide producer of condoms. It featured the actor Pu Cunxin, who has appeared in various productions by the Beijing People's Art Theater but is better known abroad for his role in the movie "Shower" (1999, directed by Zhang Yang). Pu has not only endorsed the HIV/AIDS awareness 2003 campaign, but has also supported blood donation drives. Materials like these posters could be seen all over urban China in 2003-2004.

But Pu's efforts precisely point to one of the main problems of all these educational activities: the majority of the population is not reached. Moreover, many concrete problems in the implementation of the various government initiatives continue to exist.

SARS, Avian Flu, Mexican Flu

Globalization, ever increasing cross-border traffic of people and goods over ever more porous borders has contributed greatly to the potential outbreak of pandemics. Recent years have seen the emergence of health crises and problems that were unthinkable before. In this respect, we all remember the outbreak of the Mexican flu epidemic (H1N1) in 2009 and the concomitant global panic.

Before the Mexican flu, there was SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome), for example, which erupted in Guangdong Province in November 2002. In Chinese, the disease is called *feidianxing feiyan*, a-typical pneumonia, abbreviated to *feidian*. It is believed to be linked to a virus found in wild animals such as the civet cat that are considered delicacies in the South. Apparently, the authorities were already aware of the disease by December, but they did little out of fear of the negative impact on the

economy. The virus spread to Hong Kong, across all of China and all over the globe. In Beijing, it was first detected in early March 2003.

Quite unexpectedly, after the belated acknowledgement in April 2003 by the government that SARS constituted a serious danger for the population, a propaganda campaign unfurled that had an almost Cultural-Revolution-like appearance. The official terminology used the image of a ‘people’s war’ that had to be waged against the disease, volunteers were called upon to give their utmost, and selfless models of the past, including Norman Bethune¹⁷, were invoked again to give an indication of the self sacrifice that was called for. Volunteers who went to Beijing to take part in the ‘people’s war’ against the disease were referred to as Bethunes, and medical workers were praised for ‘carrying forward the spirit of Bethune’. But this nostalgic use of the campaign mode, which included posters featuring determined health workers balling their fists, published both nationally and locally, seems an isolated one.

Nonetheless, many different versions of posters were published for use at both the national and local levels. Most of them seemed to be intended to spread knowledge about the symptoms of the disease and to give information about preventive measures, very much in line with the official circular put out by the Propaganda Department.¹⁸ Hu Jintao’s first official poster appearance was recorded on a ten-sheet educational set of materials dedicated to the identification of SARS and how to avoid infection, published in May 2003. More than any other leader, Hu made efforts to come across as an involved ‘man of the people’, thereby distinguishing himself as a leader from his predecessor, the more remote Jiang Zemin. Wen Jiabao made similar efforts. Interestingly, both leaders have advocated an uncharacteristic level of media openness with regards to the epidemic.

¹⁷ Norman Bethune (1890-1939) was a Canadian surgeon who was commissioned by Mao Zedong to organize a mobile operating unit where the lives of many Chinese partymembers and soldiers were saved (1938-1939). During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), an essay written by Mao Zedong entitled “In Memory of Norman Bethune” was incorporated in the so-called “Three Constantly Read Articles”.

¹⁸ Department of Propaganda of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), “Circular Emphasizing SARS-Related Propaganda Work”, *Chinese Law and Government*, v. 37 no. 1 (January/February 2004), 30; originally issued in May 2003.

The initial failure of the Chinese media to accurately and timely report the outbreak of SARS in early 2003 illustrates these dilemmas. Two reasons can be identified for this failure. The first was the desire to maintain stability in the fluid political situation that came about as a result of the leadership transition that saw Hu Jintao taking over from Jiang Zemin. The second was the Chinese fear to be seen as backward, as a country where lethal diseases with the potential of turning into a global pandemic could break out without the government noticing it, let alone taking steps to attempt to curb or cure the outbreak. Only when reports started to appear in the western media about an alleged government cover-up of the pandemic, and once the World Health Organization stepped in by putting China on its blacklist, the propaganda strategy was redirected in such a way that permission was given to report fully on what was happening in China.¹⁹ The SARS outbreak clearly was a learning experience of the first order.

The Chinese authorities clearly did not want to be accused of inaction by the international community for a second time when bird flu, or avian influenza (A([H5N1])) broke out in Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia, Japan and China in early 2004. Very quickly, a major propaganda campaign was underway informing the Chinese people how to deal with chickens, ducks and geese in such a way that contamination was avoided. Avian flu is extremely lethal and is able to jump species, infecting cats, pigs and humans. Similarly, the government reacted with great determination when the Mexican Flu (H1N1) epidemic broke out in 2009. The disease, termed *liugan* in Chinese, was countered with blanket information provision on detection, prevention and treatment, supported by credible and very visible actions by the various health authorities involved.

Televised Public Service Advertising

For the purpose of health communication, propaganda posters increasingly were seen

¹⁹ Joseph Fewsmith, "China's Response to SARS", *China Leadership Monitor* no. 7 (Summer 2003) (<http://www.chinaleadershipmonitor.org/>, accessed on 12 May 2003).

as falling short of their purpose. The almost complete discontinuation of their use for mobilizing purposes can be explained as the result of a number of developments that have taken place in the decades of reform. First and foremost, Chinese society has become so diverse, and the interests of the population have become so divergent that the leadership became convinced that mobilizing the masses actually constituted a threat to stability, and hence endangered continuing economic development. At the same time, the apparatus and institutions responsible for engineering popular thought and action have turned to the various new media that have emerged at the end of the 20th century, convinced that their use will have more and deeper lasting effects. But perhaps the most important explanation can be found in the fact that the Party no longer can boast of the large-scale popular support that is a prerequisite for mobilization. Political apathy and cynicism as a result of failing government services including health care and environmental protection, increased materialism, widespread disappointment about the negative effects of the much-praised results of the reform policies, all these issues have contributed to melting away the broad mass base that the CCP could mobilize in the past. Even if the Party wanted to design campaigns involving huge numbers of people, the chances are there would be hardly anybody heeding its calls.²⁰

This made it imperative for the party and government departments to reconsider the way in which they addressed the population. The traditional media had been favored in the past for this activity, euphemistically called popular education. People increasingly saw the written propaganda of traditional media like newspapers and blackboards as boring, therefore making it ineffective; the propaganda posters of the past clearly could not compete with the attractions of the many moving images and glossy commercial messages that entered with breakneck speed and in various forms through China's Open Door. The question policy makers grappled with concentrated on how to present their messages to a public that gradually discovered that there was

²⁰ Minxin Pei, "China's Governance Crisis: More than Musical Chairs", *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 81, no. 5, September/October 2002

more than the unified Voice of China that had prevailed in the preceding decades.

The disappearance of the all-inclusive *danwei* (work unit) had made the search for a new medium to spread a “new type of propaganda for the new age” even more relevant; it had become obvious that the opportunities for conveying educational and culturally stimulating behavioral indications that the work unit had provided declined if not completely disappeared. With meetings and other communal events hardly any longer taking place and with public interest in such get-togethers waning, television had become the sole source of relaxation for most of the people returning home after a hard day’s work.²¹ In 2005, the national television penetration rate amounted to more than 98 per cent, or some 1.17 billion viewers. And those viewers spent 179 minutes per day in front of their screens in 2003.²² According to Stefan Kramer, for many Chinese television had become the most important medium for constructing modern reality and identity, providing “lessons about what it means to live in a changing world where competitiveness drives national economic productivity”.²³

Television, then, became the obvious choice to carry the messages that were to inculcate desired behavior. But blunt propaganda no longer sufficed and had to make way for a new approach of reaching the people with the goals and concepts that the policymakers deemed important. In short, coercion had to make way for suggestion. Initially, government messages on television looked like the messages in the printed media they tried to replace. Gradually the realization emerged that different forms and structures were called for: what was needed was government-sponsored advertising,

²¹ Pan Zehong, *Gongyi guanggao daolun* [Introductory discussion of public service advertising] (Beijing: Zhongguo guangbo dianshi chubanshe, 2001), pp. 46, 61. Pan Zehong, *Guanggao de geming – shehui wenhua guanggao lun* [The revolution of advertising – the theory of social service advertising] (Changsha: Hunan daxue chubanshe, 2001), p. 124; Ni Ning, *Guanggao xin tiandi – Zhong Ri gongyi guanggao bijiao* [The new world of advertising – A comparison of Chinese and Japanese public service advertising] (Beijing: Zhongguo qinggongye chubanshe, 2003), p. 45.

²² Kevin Latham, “Powers of imagination – The role of the consumer in China’s silent media revolution”, Kevin Latham, Stuart Thompson and Jakob Klein (eds), *Consuming China – Approaches to cultural change in contemporary China* (London, etc.: Routledge, 2006), p. 86. Jing Wang, *Brand New China – Advertising, Media, and Commercial Culture* (Cambridge, etc.: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 248.

²³ Stefan Kramer, *Das chinesische Fernsehpublikum – Zur Rezeption und Reproduktion eines neuen Mediums* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2006), pp. 14, 111. Stephanie Donald & Michael Keane, “Media in China”, in Donald, Keane and Yin Hong (eds), *Media in China – Consumption, Content and Crisis* (London, etc.: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002), p. 14.

devoid of commercial contents. For want of a better term for the persuasive advocacy that was sought, I find the concept of social marketing coined by Kotler and Zaltman in 1971 appealing: "...the design, implementation and control of programs calculated to influence the acceptability of social ideas ... and involving considerations of product planning, ... communication, distribution, and marketing research".²⁴ In the case of China, such messages were aimed at "influenc[ing] voluntary behavior of target audiences" by providing behavioral indications, although not necessarily "in order to improve their personal welfare and that of their society".²⁵ However, as Nicholas O'Shaughnessy has pointed out in his suggestion to use the term 'social propaganda' instead, "[I]n contrast, propaganda is didactic. The propagandist is less concerned to moderate his/her message in the light of market research – he is convinced of its essential rightness and is in fact an evangelist".²⁶ What bolsters Chinese PSA, then, is a combination of the elements as proposed by Kotler and Zaltman, with a liberal dose of O'Shaughnessy: less suggestion, more persuasion; less care about personal welfare, more prescriptions for the welfare of the larger society.

The government's commercials often address general political themes, such as the central and historically inevitable role of the Party in China's successful development, or the ethnic unity that has come about under the leadership of the same Party. Increasingly, officially produced commercials are engaged in what is called "the construction of Socialist Spiritual Civilization", something that used to be the prerogative of propaganda posters. This new, non-ideology driven cultural complex is designed to reflect the staggering changes in Reform and Post-reform society on the one hand while at the same time providing for ultimate government control over that same society.²⁷ These commercials deal with the many pressing problems that contemporary Chinese are confronted with and at the same time are intended and

²⁴ Philip Kotler & Gerald Zaltman, "Social Marketing: An Approach to Planned Social Change", *Journal of Marketing*, vol. 35, no. 3 (July 1971), p. 5.

²⁵ A. Andreasen, *Marketing Social Change: Changing Behavior to Promote Health, Social Development, and the Environment*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995), p. 7

²⁶ Nicholas O'Shaughnessy, "Social propaganda and social marketing: a critical difference?", *Journal of European Marketing*, vol. 30, no. 10-11, pp. 66-67

²⁷ Xu Jianhua, Zhang Zhijun, *Dianshi fuhao – guanggao lun* [Television symbolism – discussions on advertising] (Beijing: Zhongyang guangbo dianshi daxue chubanshe, 2003), p. 131.

supposed to *propagate* (xuanchuan) certain ideas and behaviors²⁸: healthcare problems, including HIV/AIDS, SARS and avian flu; the deteriorating environment; the need to improve the existence of the millions of migrant workers that contribute to China's development; the necessity to provide education for migrant children to prevent the emergence of a lost generation; the elevation of the countryside that has been left behind in all if not most respects when compared to the urban areas; combating adolescent addiction to Internet gaming; the violation of other people's or nations' intellectual property; the dangers of smoking or driving after consuming alcohol; gambling; domestic violence, etc. Before Reform, the existence of such negative social phenomena simply was acknowledged, and even if they had been, they were never mentioned anywhere at all and therefore could not exist in the public eye.

A New Tone to Propaganda

Thanks to the explosive need for entertainment generated by the popularity of television (and the internet), a star system has emerged in China. Many 'famous' national and international Chinese – or “consumption-type idols” as they are called disparagingly²⁹ – from a variety of disciplines (sports, popular music, television shows, movies) have been called upon, or have offered their services, to do their thing for the public good. Often, the patriotic attitude of the celebrity is invoked to persuade him/her to participate. But the media's and the audience's demands for fresh faces to identify with are insatiable. This has given rise to ‘celetoids’, “...the various other social types who command media attention one day, and are forgotten the next”.³⁰ Aside from these disposable one-day media wonders, a substantive number of stars and celebrities have become involved in health and hygiene communication.

²⁸ Luo Lanqiu, *Wenhua: rang guanggao fenghuang* [Culture: Frenzied by commercials] (Chengdu: Tiandi chubanshe, 2003), p. 24.

²⁹ He Xiaozhong, “Survey Report on Idol Worship Among Children and Young People”, *Chinese Education and Society*, vol. 39, no. 1 (January/February 2006), 88. The original Chinese source is: He Xiaozhong, “Guanyu qing shao nian ouxiang chongbai de diaocha baogao,” in *Zhongguo jiaoyu lanpi shu* (Chinese Education Blue Book) (Beijing: Higher Education Publishing House, 2004).

³⁰ Chris Rojek, *Celebrity* (London: Reaktion, 2001), quoted in Graeme Turner, “The mass production of celebrity – ‘Celetoids’, reality TV and the ‘demotic turn’”, *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 9, no. 2 (2006), 156.

A few striking examples should be mentioned here. Actress Zhang Ziyi, of *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* and *House of Flying Daggers* fame, is an endorser of a wide variety of skin-care products and luxury goods. Although Zhang seems to be more popular in the West than in China itself³¹, she featured in a public service announcement campaign sponsored in 2003 by the dairy conglomerate Mengniu. The aim of this campaign was to call upon the people to pay more attention to personal hygiene to prevent SARS contamination.³² Pro-basketball legend Yao Ming, playing for the Houston Rockets in the American National Basketball Association, appeared in a commercial with the HIV-positive NBA legend Magic Johnson, none too subtly urging people not give the cold shoulder to those infected with HIV/AIDS. Li Yuchun, the surprise winner of the 2005 television hit program “Mongolian Cow Sour Milk Super Voice Girl Competition”, broadcast by Hunan Satellite Television and (again) sponsored exclusively by the giant Mengniu Dairy Company, started appearing in various public service announcements, including one for the Chinese Red Cross urging the improvement of health care facilities and services in the countryside (Spring 2008).

Are posters being used again?

Against this backdrop, it has been a surprise to see the reemergence of posters as a medium for health communication in the recent past. However, this observation needs to be qualified when putting the subject matter under closer scrutiny. In the run-up to the Beijing Olympic Games of 2008, considerable efforts were extended in publicizing the various aims of the Beijing Organizing Committee of the Olympic Games (BOCOG) through the whole spectrum of available media. Health communication was just one single aspect of a concerted propaganda/publicity campaign that extended to practically every aspect of life.³³ But this Olympic form of

³¹ Alice Xin Liu, “Zhang Ziyi crying over award dropout or *Sophie’s Revenge*?”, http://www.danwei.org/front_page_of_the_day/zhang_ziyi_crying_but_from_the.php, accessed 18 March 2010.

³² See <http://www.cctv.com/advertisement/special/C12802/20040830/102310.shtml>.

³³ Jeroen de Kloet, Gladys Pak Lei Chong, and Wei Liu, “The Beijing Olympics and the Art of Nation-State Maintenance”, *China Aktuell*, 2008/2, 11-22.

health communication was no longer devoted to a single aspect of health care, a clear departure from past practice. Rather, China as a modern(ized) and therefore healthy and hygienic nation was at the center. One of the most striking examples of this new approach to health communication was the inauguration of the new, Beijing Public Health Hotline (12320), operated under the auspices of the Beijing Municipal Center for Disease Prevention and Control and the Beijing Health Education Institute. No specific disease or ailment was addressed, no examples of particular cures were given, but rather a service number for a doctor-at-a-distance that could be dialled for expert help.

The Health Hotline also featured largely in the second type of posters, i.e., the materials that emerged in Beijing in September 2008 in the wake of the Sanlu milk powder crisis. Entitled “A Letter to Heads of Households” and signed by the Beijing Municipal Health Office, the poster consisted of text that warned Beijing citizens against the dangers involved in using certain types of milk powder. It is unclear whether other urban and/or rural governments took similar steps to provide such information. But the appearance of an after-the-fact warning against the risks of consuming foodstuffs that potentially have been tampered with may be a sign of the times, proof of the emerging urban consumer society. It is far removed from the much more blatantly educational materials that used to be at the center of the health communication in propaganda posters in the preceding decades.

Closing remarks

In this paper I have presented various aspects of the health communication undertaken in the past six decades of the PRC. Having looked at ideas about health and hygiene emerging in the late Imperial era, at examples of health propaganda in Republican times, I have focused on the communicative practice of propaganda posters devoted to health themes. Moreover, I have argued that the medium of the propaganda poster has slowly but surely fallen into disuse. The television commercial, or more specifically, the public service announcement, has taken over its place and function. Nonetheless,

in the run-up to the Beijing Olympic Games of 2008, the posters seem to have re-emerged again.

A crucial gap in our understanding of the use of the propaganda poster (or the public service announcement, for that matter) concerns the reception, popularity and influence of this medium. Has it really brought about what it was supposed to do? 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, no matter whether they were written up in the early days of the PRC or later, however, 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 plus decades present a picture that modifies these 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 apparently were 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.³⁴ That raises the question for whom they were published, then.

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 mobilize the people, and they have been the favored medium for educational purposes. Seen from this perspective, we should not find it strange that during the six decades that the CCP has been in power, no proof exists that the Party ever considered undertaking research into the reception and effectiveness of its campaign materials: they simply were seen as the right message at the right time. However, in this day and age, the time has come to actually engage with these questions.

³⁴ Stefan R. Landsberger, “Confessions of a Poster Collector”, *Reminiscences and Ruminations – China Information Anniversary Supplement*, vol. 9, No. 1 (Summer 1994), p. 38.

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