Realising the Chinese Dream: three visions of making China great again

1

Stefan R. Landsberger

The founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) on 1 October 1949 ended a long period of imperialism, internal strife and war. Under the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), modernisation became the most important task. During the first three decades of CCP rule, propaganda posters were part of a concerted media strategy to mobilise the population to contribute to China's reconstruction. Ideological purity and revolutionary motivation were considered to be important factors to help regain the nation the greatness it had enjoyed during the imperial era. By 1978 more pragmatic policies had replaced the Maoist revolutionary goals, turning China into today's economic powerhouse.

Many propaganda posters featured hyper-realistic, ageless, larger-than-life peasants, soldiers, workers and youngsters in dynamic poses battling for development, or exposing class enemies. Not all served strictly utilitarian, abstract goals, glorifying work and personal sacrifice for the greater well-being, and some rather seemed to offer a moment of repose. An analysis of three paradigmatic posters that were published in 1958, 1967 and 1975, respectively, will show that despite the hold that ideology in the form of Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought had on culture, there was space for more fantasy-inspired visions of the future than those that the materialist outlook on development suggested.

Reconstructing the nation, educating the people

Once reconstruction got underway in 1949, no aspect of political, social or cultural life was excluded from the modernisation project that was inspired and fuelled by Marxism-Leninism, applied to the Chinese conditions in the form of Mao Zedong Thought. The CCP needed to convince the population that establishing socialism was the solution.[1] This was not an unprecedented task, but art and government had never been more intertwined than in the early 1950s.[2] Like most of the ruling elites that had preceded it over the millennia, the party was obsessively concerned with guiding the morals and

behaviour of the population and educating the people. The political and moral exhortations and messages were communicated through diverse media, including newspapers, films, radio broadcasts, literature, poetry, painting, stage plays, songs and other artistic expressions. In a country with as many illiterates as China had at the time, propaganda posters worked particularly well to educate the people, giving concrete expression to the many different abstract policies and the many visions of the future that the CCP proposed and entertained.

Propaganda posters were produced cheaply and easily, and this added to their use as a vehicle for government-directed communications. They were widely available through bookstores and work units, and could be seen everywhere, providing colour to the otherwise drab places where most of the people lived. Posters penetrated every level of social organisation and cohabitation, and succeeded in reaching even the lowest ones: the multicoloured prints adorned the walls not only of offices, meeting rooms and factories, but of private houses and dormitories as well. Many people liked the posters for their colours, composition and visual contents; the intended political message or the slogans that might be printed underneath often went unnoticed. When the state moved into heavy campaign mode and poster contents were politicised to the extreme, as happened during the Cultural Revolution, having a correct poster on display did help in proving one's correct political standpoint.[3]

But what exactly is a propaganda poster? According to many artists and designers, the term 'propaganda art' (or 'poster art') cannot be used indiscriminately to signify all art that has been produced in the PRC. In their opinion, poster art should be divided into discrete genres such as *nianhua* (New Year prints, 年画), *youhua* (oil paintings, 油画), *shuifenhua* (gouache, 水粉画), *mubanhua* (woodcuts, 木版画), *Zhongguo hua* (traditional paintings, 中国画), *xuanchuan hua* (propaganda posters, 宣传画) and so on. This classification is inspired largely by the bureaucratic way in which the arts sector was and is organised in China. Water colourists did not mix with oil painters, woodcutters worked separately from traditional painters, and propaganda poster artists were at the bottom of the hierarchy. Artists insisted, then and now, that art can be called propaganda art only when it is specifically designed for a campaign and contains at least one politically inspired slogan. Nevertheless, all these definitions complicate the matter rather than provide answers. Some posters have explicit political or propagandistic contents, while others do not. Similarly, some contain one or more politically inspired slogans, but not all of them do. Many artists acknowledged that they themselves had mixed up the fine distinctions between the various styles in the days of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, when all art had to have propaganda value.

On the basis of the incomplete statistics provided by *Renmin meishu* (People's Art, 人民美术) in April 1950, one can calculate that in 1949, 379 different poster designs were published, with a total print run of almost 6.8 million copies. Some 10 per cent were devoted to the founding of the PRC, and 13 per cent had the deep love of the people for the leadership as their subject. Another 10 per cent showed the close relations between the army and the people, and a staggering proprortion of 31 per cent was devoted to agricultural production. Such data point to the political priorities at the time.[4] Shen Kuiyi has calculated that the Shanghai People's Fine Arts Publishing House, one of the dominant poster publishers until the 1980s, published more than 2,000 poster designs in 40 million copies between 1954 and 1966, whereas the Beijing People's Fine Arts Publishing House published 500 poster designs in some 28 million copies between 1951 and 1959.[5] Another source, *Meishu* (Fine Arts, 美术), published in 1960, reported about a single publisher's poster output. The Tianjin Fine Arts Publishing House produced 17 different poster designs in 1957, with a total print run of 144,000 copies; 130 posters in 1958, totalling 13.2 million copies; and 120 posters in 1959, with total print numbers of 3.4 million copies.[6] On a side note, the huge increase in the numbers of posters published in 1958, the year in which the Great Leap Forward started, is correlated to the mobilisational effects that were ascribed to propaganda posters at the time, and a testimony to the productive enthusiasm of the poster-producing field.

Designing posters

After 1949 the state assumed the responsibility of allocating jobs to all Chinese citizens. This in effect meant that one could become an (officially recognised) artist only when one was employed in a (state) art academy, art publishing house, museum, art association, or similar institution. As employer, the state was guaranteed ideological and artistic control over artists and their works: if cultural producers did not behave as 'salaried company men (or women)', and failed to follow the directives from above or to apply self-censorship (also termed as 'the [artist's] appreciation of the social significance of culture') to make their art comply with these directives, they faced ostracism and their livelihood would be at stake.[7] Established artists from many disciplines were co-opted to produce the inspirational and motivational images that could be mass-produced. Some had a commercial background, having worked for advertising agencies or commercial publishers; other artists had joined the army or revolutionary movement at an early stage and had been trained in the People's Liberation Army, or had been educated at the Yan'an Lu Xun yishu wenxue yuan (Lu Xun Academy of Literature and Art, 鲁迅艺术文学院) and were well versed in the ideological dimensions that guided art.

Mao Zedong first formulated the dimensions of CCP control over culture in his opening and closing remarks at the Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art in 1942; these would continue to function as the basic cultural policy for decades to follow.[8] Revolutionary art should adopt traditional forms infused with political messages that could be easily understood and appreciated by the masses.[9] It should address distinct social groups with different cultural backgrounds, occupations and levels of education. All target groups had to be addressed in terms of their own psychology and experience, and general political issues linked with everyday life. Mao spelled out how the CCP would employ the arts in the political socialisation of the population:

> Literature and art [must] become a component part of the whole revolutionary machinery, so they can act as a powerful weapon in uniting and educating the people while attacking and annihilating the enemy, and help the people achieve solidarity in their struggle against the enemy.[10]

Mao objected to the wholesale and uncritical importation of foreign images and their use in Chinese art. Moreover, he rejected the notion of art for art's sake as bourgeois, as well as the notion of art as being classless or politically independent. There was no room for art forms that were popular among the cosmopolitan or bourgeois urbanites; art had to serve the masses of peasants, workers and soldiers. Art had to satisfy the people's cultural demands while at the same time raising cultural standards. More importantly, arts and artists had to serve politics, that is, the demands of the CCP, as representative of the masses. Mao summed up his expectations:

> What we demand is a unity of politics and art, a unity of content and form, a unity of revolutionary political content and the most perfect artistic form possible.[11]

Mao implied that art needed to adopt the aesthetic forms and practices that were popular and prevalent among the intended consumers (at that particular time, people living in the countryside) to present contents that were in line with the political goals established by the CCP. He also implied that under different conditions, other aesthetic forms and practices could be made dominant.[12]

With this in mind, how were posters designed? In the 'made to order' mechanism, propaganda is produced in a 'top-down' fashion. The CCP Central Committee and the Propaganda Department formulate the broad guidelines of a campaign that is to unfold. The artists subsequently are informed of the campaign objectives through their place of employment. Artists design works making these objectives visible and explaining them. The finished works, once approved by the commissioning bodies, are reproduced and made available to the public.

In the 'selection' option, propaganda is produced in a 'bottom-up' way. Artists in academies and associations are instructed to produce a specific amount of art each year, reflecting the political climate. They do this in return for their salaries; after all, artists are on the state's payroll. Alternatively, the artists are swept up in unfolding campaigns, as for example during the Great Leap Forward.[13] The artistic products, selected and approved by the CCP Central Committee and Propaganda Department, are put to use in a campaign that is already unfolding, or that is about to be organised.

The most likely process combines both methods.[14] Artists produce a circumscribed number of artworks on the basis of ideological and general artistic guidelines that they have internalised. These works are peer-reviewed, and this process is repeated at each successively higher level of bureaucratic organisation.[15] The Propaganda Department finally selects the artistic products that most appropriately visualise the campaign.

Leaping forward

As a result of the successful economic reconstruction of the early 1950s, the party considered the conditions ripe for a Great Leap Forward in 1958. The people had to go all out to surpass England in fifteen years (or even less) through 'greater, faster, better, [and] cheaper' production.[16] The Great Leap was accompanied by a massive propaganda effort, the depth and breadth of which had not been seen before. Culture in the broadest sense played a major role: propaganda posters provided visions of what the future would look like, preparing the people to do what was expected of them and whipping up their enthusiasm. Increasingly, Mao and the CCP became convinced that by merely relying on willpower, a quick transformation of the concrete obstacles encountered in the physical world would be possible.[17]

Art had to be produced in larger quantities and at a faster pace than before. This is illustrated by the production numbers quoted previously. The poster designer Ha Qiongwen had fond memories of working at the time in impromptu groups of artists that took responsibility for the total production process, from conception, through design, to printing and distributing posters, within a twenty-four hour time frame.[18] Posters and magazines communicated the artistic interpretations of the Great Leap's objectives of producing stupendous amounts of steel in backyard furnaces and harvesting bumper crops of foodstuffs. The effects that posters particularly had on mobilising the workforce further convinced the propaganda workers of their usefulness. Under pressure to create ever larger quantities of art, professional artists were sent down to factories and villages to work along with amateur peasant and worker painters, whom they earlier might not have considered true artists. The huge demand for art gave these amateurs the chance to embark on an artistic career.

1.1 Wang Liuying (王柳影), Xin Liliang (忻礼良), Wu Shaoyun (吴少云), Jin Zhaofang (金肇芳), Meng Muyi (孟幕颐), Yu Weibo (俞微波), Xu Jiping (徐寄萍), Lu Zezhi (陆泽之) and Zhang Biwu (张碧梧), *Chengfeng polang gexian shentong* (Brave the wind and the waves, everyone has remarkable abilities, 乘风破浪 各显神通), 1958

Brave the wind and the waves, everyone has remarkable abilities

Illustration 1.1 encapsulates many of the elements discussed in the preceding paragraphs. *Chengfeng polang gexian shentong* (Brave the wind and the waves, everyone has remarkable abilities, 乘风破浪 各显神通), published in Shanghai in 1958, is a poster designed by nine prominent, established artists: Wang Liuying, Xin Liliang, Wu Shaoyun, Jin Zhaofang, Meng Muyi, Yu Weibo, Xu Jiping, Lu Zezhi and Zhang Biwu, each of whom contributed an element they were most proficient at. Xin Liliang, for example, formerly an advertisement designer, had already designed posters featuring a similar seated female textile worker (right, off centre), and would continue to do so later; Wu Shaoyun had designed many posters featuring peasant women, like the woman with the fan in the back; Meng Muyi often designed posters showing (little) children; Xu Jiping specialised in ethnic minorities; and Zhang Biwu, a former calendar poster designer, was known for his representations of uniformed figures as well as female tractor drivers (centre left and centre).[19] In short, all cooperated in this art project in which each contributed his strong points. We will never know whether they came together

spontaneously to create this piece, or whether their work units ordered them to cooperate.

The image itself combines a dreamscape with an assortment of people moving towards the left (the future). It is an example of the fusion of revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism that Mao had decreed in 1957. This vision of Mao's was usually defined as 'revolutionary realism takes realism as its keynote, and blends it with romanticism', whereas 'revolutionary romanticism takes romanticism as its keynote, but blends it with realism'.[20] In this way, art would become more visionary and help to imbue the population with the necessary spirit of self-sacrifice, hope and enthusiasm to overcome concrete obstacles by pure willpower and to transform romantic ideas into reality. At the same time, it eliminated the gloominess that characterised the Soviet-inspired socialist realism that had been dominant in China since the early 1950s. Gloom was considered inappropriate now that enthusiasm ran high.[21] This particular image, the artistic style it represents and the specific previous work experience of many of its designers can also be seen as a successful merger of propaganda aesthetics and those of the Shanghai Style, in which Art Deco, Cubist and traditional Chinese patterns and motifs had been blended in the 1930s; this latter style, 'best known in the form of cigarette advertisements featuring attractive women', was known as the calendar, or *yuefenpai* (月份牌), style.[22]

The figures are easily recognisable for any spectator: we see a male steel worker, leading the procession, indicating that the workers are the vanguard of the movement and steel production is the main focus. The female textile worker and the tractor girl follow immediately, pointing to the liberation of the female productive forces and the de-gendering of the use of technology. The male soldier on the motorcycle is parallel to their position, signifying both defence of the nation (and the Great Leap efforts) and military modernisation. The tractor pulls along a quantity of hay, and this in turn is accompanied by a young boy in Communist Youth League uniform, representing (urban, intellectual, politically educated) youth, the hope for the future. These figures are followed by a female representative of a minority ethnicity cuddling a lamb, a peasant woman holding up a fan, and a young male and a young female intellectual, the latter carrying along land surveying equipment. The procession continues with a representative of the railways, a nurse, a party activist with a radio receiver on his lap and so on. In short, the poster (re)presents a cross-section of the population; everyone laying eyes on this poster will find instances of recognition and inspiration. The bespectacled man sitting on a missile, reading a book, seems the odd one out, yet he could represent the scientists who at the time were working on realising the Chinese dream of conquering space. Moreover, space imagery was very much part of the Great Leap parlance and iconography, inspired by the successful launching by the

Soviet Union of the Sputnik, the first artificial Earth satellite, in 1957. By supplying these visual role models, the image succeeded in directly appealing to various occupational groups; simply doing what one was supposed to do was all that was demanded. At the same time, it projects a feeling of joy, of success and accomplishment.

The image succeeds in simultaneously blending traditional and modern elements: the trades and people that are represented, mobilised to make the Great Leap a success, reflect the present. The waves on which these representatives of progress are moving forward are directly taken from traditional popular culture. Here, the link with the mythological story 'Nezha Conquers the Dragon King' is particularly apt. It is part of a hugely popular vernacular work from the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), *Fengshen yanyi* (The Creation of the Gods, 封神演义), in which history, folklore, mythology, legends and fantasy are combined. Nezha, a warrior deity, is generally depicted fighting against various evil forces on top of raging waves, producing recognisable visual elements. Stories like Nezha's were retold by story-tellers but also were the subjects of puppet plays and other forms of popular drama.

Posters like this grasped popular attention because they used a variety of popular forms. The variety and the particular choices of genres favoured by different groups in the population helped to make them widely popular.[23] They did not show political tropes, like steel production or production drives in agriculture, that featured in other posters published at the time. They lacked elements such as '… yearly production goals … emblazoned on brilliantly coloured banners and symbolic monuments'.[24] Instead, the design was restrained, dreamlike, full of fantasy, romantic and at the same time somewhat glamorous, offering a moment of respite in an atmosphere of constant activity.

High Maoism

In the years leading up to the Cultural Revolution of 1966–76, art was revolutionised and guided completely by Mao Zedong Thought. Proletarian ideology, communist morale and spirit, and revolutionary heroism were the main elements of this hyper-realistic, politicised art.[25] The colour red dominated, as it symbolised everything revolutionary, good and upright; this was a throwback to traditional colour symbolism skilfully employed for political demands. The colour black signified precisely the opposite.[26]

The figure of Mao Zedong, his revolutionary role and his thoughts dominated much of the propaganda that was produced. His image was considered more important than the occasion for which a particular work was designed: in some cases, identical posters featuring Mao were published in different years bearing different slogans, in other words serving different causes.[27] He

was depicted as a benevolent father surrounded by children, or he was portrayed as a wise statesman, an astute military leader or a great teacher. Artists represented him very much as Lenin had been represented in the early 1920s in the Soviet Union: towering over the masses, with an outstretched arm suggesting a benediction.[28]

His countenance beamed down from the huge billboards along the streets and avenues in urban areas. His portrait decorated steam locomotives and harbour cranes. Photographs showing his face were placed in the fields, overseeing rural production.[29] The people themselves wore Mao badges in varying sizes. He figured larger than life in the huge visual representations of a future communist utopia. The quotations from his writings, with political and ideological exhortations, were often compared to a magical or supernatural weapon, a 'spiritual atom bomb' or even a 'beacon of light'; they graced every imaginable surface.[30] By being omnipresent, he not only watched over work and encouraged the people to work even harder to bring about the future he envisaged, but also provided blessings for all human activities.[31]

No matter how he appeared, Mao had to be painted *hong, guang, liang* (red, bright and shining); no grey was allowed for shading, and the use of black was interpreted as sign of an artist's counter-revolutionary intentions.[32] For his face, reddish and other warm tones were used, and in such a way that it appeared smooth and seemed to radiate as the primary source of light in a composition. In many instances, his head seemed to be surrounded by a halo, which emanated a divine light that illuminated the faces of the people standing in his presence.[33]

Yanzhe Mao zhuxi de geming wenyi luxian shengli qianjin (Advance victoriously while following Chairman Mao's revolutionary line in literature and the arts, 沿着毛主席的革命文艺路线胜利前进), a rare three-sheet poster published in about 1968, illustrates the process of deification at work (Illustration 1.2). Mao's disembodied face hovers over the masses like a sun god. These masses, in turn, representing the literary and art worlds, are dressed up like performers of the revolutionary model works such as the Red Detachment of Women and the Red Lantern, and would be instantly recognisable to the viewers. A copy of Liu Chunhua's famous 1968 painting/poster *Mao zhuxi qu Anyuan* (Chairman Mao goes to Anyuan, 毛主席去安源) is visible at the right. The red book held aloft in the centre is a copy of Mao's *Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art*. The slogans and banners all express the commitment of the cultural producers to serve the workers-peasants-soldiers.

As a consequence of these rules governing his depiction, Mao came to be portrayed as increasingly god-like and divorced from the masses.[34] And yet, despite this apparent distance between Leader and Led, there was something in these images that continued to strike a chord with the people, something that invited identification, something recognisable.[35]

1.2 The Central Academy of Arts and Crafts (中央工艺美术学院), *Yanzhe Mao zhuxi de geming wenyi luxian shengli qianjin* (Advance victoriously while following Chairman Mao's revolutionary line in literature and the arts, 沿着毛主席的革命文艺路线胜利前进), c. 1968

Man's world is mutable, seas become mulberry fields

There is no better way to illustrate this than with the poster entitled *Renjian zhengdao shi cangsang – Mao zhuxi shicha Huabei, Zhongnan he Huadong diqu de wuchan jieji wenhua da geming xingshi* (Man's world is mutable, seas become mulberry fields: Chairman Mao inspects the situation of the Great Proletarian Revolution in northern, south-central and eastern China, 人间正道是沧桑-毛主席视察华北、中南和华东地区的无产阶级文化大革命形势), published in 1967 (Illustration 1.3). The title quotes the last line from Mao's poem 'The People's Liberation Army Captures Nanking [*sic*]', from April 1949.[36] It is a reference to a world in which everything is changing. Foregrounding the figure of Mao hovering over the nation, it represents the type of propaganda designed during the 1967–68 Red Sea Movement, when the whole nation was called upon to paint Mao portraits and cover the nation with them; this included professional and amateur artists alike. The Red Sea Movement did not necessarily call upon people to engage in specific behaviour; rather, it intended to turn the Leader into an embodiment of the revolution.

According to Shengtian Zheng, one of the three artists involved in its creation, the poster originally was painted in 1967 as a unique fresco outside the Hangzhou Steel Factory in Hangzhou.[37] Zheng, although considered 'a bourgeois intellectual amenable to reform' at the time and therefore of questionable political trustworthiness, was made responsible for the total composition. The other artists who participated, Zhou Ruiwen and Xu Junxuan, were considered more dependable ideologically; they were ordered to paint Mao's face and

Zhejiang Worker-Peasant-Soldier Art Academy (浙江工农兵美术大学): Shengtian Zheng (郑胜天), Zhou Ruiwen (周瑞文) and Xu Junxuan (徐君萱), *Renjian zhengdao shi cangsang – Mao zhuxi shicha Huabei, Zhongnan he Huadong diqu de wuchan jieji wenhua da geming xingshi* (Man's world is mutable, seas become mulberry fields: Chairman Mao inspects the situation of the Great Proletarian Revolution in northern, south-central and eastern China, 人间正道是沧桑-毛主席视察华北、中南和华东地区的无产阶级文化大革命形势), December 1967 **1.3**

body, respectively.[38] Despite their different political labels, all three agreed on the bold way in which the change hinted at in Mao's poem needed to be visualised: they opted for a romanticised style that was not very common at the time. Moreover, they employed stylistic elements from traditional landscape painting (*shanshui,* 山水), which was then under attack for being a traditional art form.[39] In a 2016 interview, Zheng recounts how he put

> … Mao standing above the clouds, where he could see all of China from the sky. And the ground was covered with red flags. On the ground, you can recognize cities; I made Hangzhou the largest … Shanghai is there, and you can also see Jinggangshan and Shaoshan in Hunan, where Mao was born.[40]

According to Zheng, hundreds of thousands of copies were made and distributed in journals and magazines; they were reprinted as large-format posters and in smaller formats. The poster found its way onto biscuit tins, mirrors and postage stamps. It was reproduced on huge billboards.[41] Although it resonated with the popular audience, when a friend of Zheng showed it to Mao's wife Jiang Qing in May 1968, she expressed her dislike for it.[42] She

interpreted Mao's 1967 trip to which the image alluded as an implicit criticism of her own policies. According to Zheng, Jiang thought that Mao's chin had not been painted well, and remarked that '[P]eople may like this painting, but I don't. I don't think Mao's likeness is strong, and Mao never carried a coat like this.'[43] It was only later, after the end of the Cultural Revolution when much pertinent documentation about the period was released, that Zheng and his fellow artists understood how Jiang's feeling of being criticised by Mao had been the reason behind the sudden drop in high-level support for an image that generally seemed so well liked.

Agrarian utopia

In spring 1969, the Cultural Revolution officially ended by means of a declaration at the ninth CCP congress, which convened at the time. In reality, the power struggle that was at the heart of the movement continued until Mao's death in September 1976. After having painted China red in the previous years, the attention of politics and culture now turned to the countryside, where the majority of the population still lived in relative backwardness. Despite the poor living conditions, proletarian consciousness was considered to be extremely high, and the ambition to turn China into a revolutionary rural nation was set as a new goal. To this end, life in the rural areas and the revolutionary qualities of the peasants were praised in propaganda. Posters that were imbued with a rosy image of the countryside were designed and distributed on a massive scale. The Chinese Dream that was presented in the early 1970s, the dream of China's future, was nothing less than an agrarian utopia. Although they addressed typically rustic scenes, settings and people, many of the artists who designed these images were from urban areas, leading to idealised images that lacked the verisimilitude that is so essential in making propaganda fit to believe in.[44]

To bring propaganda art design and topics closer to reality, amateur artists among the peasants received attention and support. The best-known were the peasant painters from Huxian, Shaanxi Province, who had picked up their brushes during the Great Leap Forward period and had gained modest national attention at the time. At the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, their works had already been singled out.[45] By 1972 the Chinese media had rediscovered them, and in 1973 an exhibition of the most talented works was held in Beijing. The Huxian artworks presented the images of harmony and abundance, of joy and devotion, that the CCP liked to spread to demonstrate what the Cultural Revolution had brought about.[46]

The Huxian amateurs made use of the traditional rural art forms of the New Year print and the woodblock print. The decorative effects of these forms consisted of bold and vivid primary colours in large blocks, 'simple

compositional structures whereby almost the entire picture area is crowded with look-alike figures' or repetitious arrangements of particular motifs. The happy peasants who were depicted while taking part in production, political meetings and study sessions made these images invaluable for propaganda purposes. The fact that the artists had started as amateurs and had been able to blend professional techniques and popular art forms was used to validate Mao's vision of a society where everybody simultaneously could be a worker, peasant, soldier or artist.[47] Although these amateurs were promoted as representatives of the innate creative genius of the masses, it was later admitted that they had received extensive professional help and assistance in 'the composition of their pictures, as well as with the conception, presentation and skilful rendering' in their work. This is discernible in how the flat, single-dimensional figures of the early paintings have been replaced with more three-dimensional figures, and how later works testify to a greater use of perspective.[48]

Du Mingcen and Yao Zhongxin's *Caibi hui xintu* (Drawing new pictures with a coloured brush, 彩笔绘新图) gives an impression of a 'peasant painter' at work (Illustration 1.4). It does not necessarily represent artistic practices in Huxian, but shows the act of creating artwork, and the attention it attracts, as well. The artist looks directly at the viewer, who takes up the space of the

Du Mingcen (杜明岑) and Yao Zhongxin (姚种新), *Caibi hui xintu* (Drawing new pictures with a coloured brush, 彩笔绘新图), September 1975 **1.4**

artwork she creates on the basis of the design that is placed on a stool. It is one of the few examples of revolutionary art that directly communicates with the spectator.

The French-based Chinese oil painter Zhao Wuji (Zou Wu-ki) was impressed by these paintings and decided to show them abroad. With his help, some eighty paintings from Huxian were exhibited in Paris in 1975, thus giving the peasant painters unexpected international acclaim and allowing interested Westerners an unexpected and rather poetic view of China.

Spring hoeing

To conclude, I will discuss Ms Li Fenglan's *Chun chu* (Spring hoeing, 春锄), from 1975 (Illustration 1.5). Ms Li originally engaged in traditional paper cutting, but in the late 1950s she started to learn painting, taking her inspiration from various aspects of rural production.[49] The painting shows the preparatory work for wheat planting. In the words of Ms Li,

> In spring when the winter wheat turns green again, we women do the hoeing. The countryside is especially beautiful then. Gardenlike wheat fields of tender green contrast with pink peach blossoms in full bloom. Going to work at such times I can hardly tear my eyes away. And I have always wanted to

1.5 Li Fenglan (李凤兰), *Chun chu* (Spring hoeing, 春锄), 1975

> paint the scene to show the moving beauty of the new socialist countryside and how enthusiastic we women commune members are in building it. So, while I worked, I started to carefully observe the people working around me. And during rest breaks I made sketches of them. It was on this basis that I started, amended and finally created 'Spring Hoeing'. It contains 16 persons, each of whom I had previously sketched. The middle-aged woman in the blue jacket in front is based on sketches of our women's team leader in our brigade.[50]

The women prepare the soil for a new season of planting and growing. This surely symbolises the general mood of hope after the events of the Cultural Revolution: regeneration, growth. This is further strengthened by the appearance of the swallows. Aside from being seen as harbingers of spring (a new beginning), they traditionally stand for an approaching success; their twittering, moreover, is often used to suggest a comparison with women's voices.[51] One of the striking qualities of this painting is its suggestion of emptiness, of peace and quiet; one can almost imagine how serene it is. It is also thematically linked to the mists and fogs typical of traditional landscape painting. But aside from their utopian visions of the future, the Huxian paintings-turned-propaganda-posters showed idealised peasants, clean, well clothed, well fed, politically engaged and productive.[52]

Since the founding of the PRC, China has been a space dominated by propaganda, the more aggressive the better. Some of the five images presented here, all published as propaganda posters, rather stand out for their dream-like quality. If we regard the successive campaigns designed by the CCP and Mao as attempts to completely re-form and re-structure Chinese society, we should also be aware that the culture and social structure that Maoism tried to do away with held on tenaciously.[53] This could explain why non-political, non-aggressive, colourful and happy images, even while containing deeper ideological meanings, were popular items with which to decorate one's private space. Barbara Mittler argues that the new art that the PRC introduced, with the intention to do away with all artistic expressions that had preceded it, actually had to contain vestiges of the old art that needed to be eradicated in order to be acceptable.[54]

Mao's opening and closing remarks at the Yan'an Forum had a great influence on art and culture during the first three decades of the PRC. The event as such is still commemorated yearly, with high state leaders delivering speeches at renowned universities urging for academic excellence, creativity and contributions to the greater well-being of the nation. But when we look at some of the art that has been produced during the heydays of Maoism and since, it seems as if Chinese culture has been more successful at subverting the intention of the Yan'an Talks rather than the other way around.

Notes

1 Julia Strauss, 'Morality, Coercion and State Building by Campaign in the early PRC: Regime Consolidation and After, 1949–1956', *China Quarterly*, 188 (2006), 891–912.
2 Chang-tai Hung, 'Repainting China: New Year Prints (*Nianhua*) and Peasant Resistance in the Early Years of the People's Republic', *Society for Comparative Study of Society and History*, 42:4 (2000), 776.
3 Interview with the designer Ha Qiongwen, 15 January 1998, Shanghai. Sui Tianzhong, 'Lishi huanjing yu yishude yiyi' [Historical circumstances and the meaning of art], *Century Art History Study*, http://cl2000.com/history/wenge/taolun/04.shtml (accessed 7 April 2003 no longer accessible).
4 Jian An, 'Yijiuwuling nian nianhua gongzuode jixiang tongji' [Some statistics on New Year print production in 1950], *Renmin meishu*, 2 (April 1950), 52–53.
5 Kuiyi Shen, 'Propaganda Posters and Art during the Cultural Revolution', in Melissa Chiu and Shengtian Zheng (eds), *Art and China's Revolution* (New York: Asia Society; New Haven: in association with Yale University Press, 2008), 156.
6 'Cujin xuanchuanhua zhuangzuode gengda fazhan' [Promote an even greater development in the creation of propaganda posters], *Meishu* [Fine Arts], 2 (1960), 8.
7 Geremie Barmé, 'The Chinese Velvet Prison: Culture in the "New Age", 1976–89', *Issues & Studies* (August 1989), 64 and 73.
8 Bonnie S. McDougall, *Mao Zedong's 'Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art': A Translation of the 1953 Text with Commentary*, Michigan Papers in Chinese Studies, no. 39 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1980), 39.
9 James Flath, '"It's a Wonderful Life": "Nianhua" and "Yuefenpai" at the Dawn of the People's Republic', *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, 16:2 (2004), 124.
10 McDougall, *Mao Zedong's 'Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art'*, 58.
11 McDougall, *Mao Zedong's 'Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art'*, 78.
12 McDougall, *Mao Zedong's 'Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art'*, 39.
13 Kuiyi Shen, 'Propaganda Posters in China', in Stefan R. Landsberger and M. van der Heijden (eds), *Chinese Posters: The IISH–Landsberger Collections* (Munich: Prestel Publishers, 2009); interview with the designer Ha Qiongwen, 15 January 1998, Shanghai.
14 Jerome Silbergeld (with Gong Jisui), *Contradictions: Artistic Life, the Socialist State and the Chinese Painter Li Huasheng* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1993).
15 Silbergeld, *Contradictions*, p. 5.

16 Thomas P. Bernstein, *Up to the Mountains and Down to the Villages: The Transfer of Youth from Urban to Rural China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 35.
17 Alan P. L. Liu, *Communications and National Integration in Communist China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 32, 55; Paul J. Hiniker, *Revolutionary Ideology & Chinese Reality: Dissonance under Mao* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1977), 67–68.
18 Interview, 15 January 1998, Shanghai.
19 Chinese Posters Foundation, Xin Liliang, http://chineseposters.net/artists/xinliliang.php (accessed 14 November 2018); Chinese Posters Foundation, Zhang Biwu, http://chineseposters.net/artists/zhangbiwu.php (accessed 14 November 2018); Flath, 'Wonderful Life', 125.
20 Kuo Mo-Jo (Guo Moruo), 'Romanticism and Realism', *Peking Review*, 15 July 1958, 11.
21 Maria Galikowski, *Art and Politics in China 1949–1984* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1998), 100–104; Joan Lebold Cohen, *The New Chinese Painting 1949–1986* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1987), 90.
22 Scott Minick and Jiao Ping, *Chinese Graphic Design in the Twentieth Century* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1990), 22–23, 44–51; Flath, 'Wonderful Life', 125.
23 Barbara Mittler, 'Popular Propaganda? Art and Culture in Revolutionary China', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 152:4 (2008), 478.
24 *Dayuejin tuhua cankao ziliao* [Reference materials for Great Leap Forward pictures] (Tianjin: Tianjin meishu chubanshe, 1958); Minick and Jiao, *Chinese Graphic Design*, 106, 110–111.
25 Ellen Johnston Laing, *The Winking Owl: Art in the People's Republic of China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 54–56; Minick and Jiao, *Chinese Graphic Design*, 120.
26 Xiao-ming Yang, *The Rhetoric of Propaganda: A Tagmemic Analysis of Selected Documents of the Cultural Revolution in China* (New York: Peter Lang, 1994), 94–97.
27 Interview with Yang Peiming, director of Shanghai Propaganda Art Centre, Shanghai, 17 January 1998.
28 Laing, *The Winking Owl*, 65–66; Victoria E. Bonnell, *Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Posters under Lenin and Stalin* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 142–147.
29 Göran Aijmer, 'Political Ritual: Aspects of the Mao Cult during the Cultural "Revolution"', in 'Perspectives on Mao and the Cultural Revolution', special issue of *China Information*, 11:2–3 (1996), 221, 222.
30 James T. Myers, 'Religious Aspects of the Cult of Mao Tse-tung', *Current Scene*, 10:3 (1972), 6, 8.
31 Aijmer, 'Political Ritual', 226.
32 Silbergeld, *Contradictions*, 43; Cohen, *The New Chinese Painting*, 22; Julia F. Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China 1949–1979* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 360.
33 Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China*, 360.

34 Laing, *The Winking Owl*, 66–67; Minick and Jiao, *Chinese Graphic Design*, 124–125.
35 Geremie Barmé, *Shades of Mao: The Posthumous Cult of the Great Leader* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1996), 19; Robert Benewick, 'Icons of Power: Mao Zedong and the Cultural Revolution', in Harriet Evans and Stephanie Donald (eds), *Picturing Power in the People's Republic of China: Posters of the Cultural Revolution* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 128.
36 'The People's Liberation Army Captures Nanking – a *lu shih*, April 1949', Marxist.org, www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/poems/poems19.htm (accessed 14 November 2018).
37 Shengtian Zheng, 'China – the Red Sons: A Screening and Conversation with Shengtian Zheng', China Institute, New York, 3 May 2016, www.aaa-a.org/programs/china-the-red-sons-a-screening-and-conversation-with-zheng-shengtian/ (accessed 28 January 2017).
38 Shengtian Zheng, 'Art and Revolution: Looking Back at Thirty Years of History', in Chiu and Shengtian (eds), *Art and China's Revolution*, 32–34.
39 Thomas J. Berghuis, 'History and Community in Contemporary Chinese Art', *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, 1:1 (2014), 19.
40 Zheng, 'Red Sons'. Zheng is a native of Hangzhou. The city at the time was considerably smaller than Shanghai. After the Shanghai Massacre of 1927, the remnants of the CCP and the Red Army sought refuge in Jinggangshan.
41 Zheng, 'Red Sons'.
42 Zheng, 'Art and Revolution', 34; Zheng, 'Red Sons'.
43 Zheng, 'Red Sons'.
44 Jeremy Brown, 'Staging Xiaojinzhuang: The City in the Countryside, 1974–1976', in Joseph W. Esherick, Paul G. Pickowicz and Andrew G. Walder (eds), *The Chinese Cultural Revolution as History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 154.
45 Dean Ashton, 'Huxian's Foolish Old Men Create New Scenes: Huxian Peasant Paintings from the Cultural Revolution and their Ideological Discourses', *Arbutus Review*, 1 (2010), 49.
46 Wang Mingxian and Yan Shanchun, *Xin Zhongguo meishu tushi – 1966–1976* [The art history of the People's Republic of China – 1966–1976], 110–116; Jutta Bewig (ed.), *Bauernmalerei aus Huxian* [Peasant paintings from Huxian] (Frankfurt am Main: Gesellschaft für Deutsch-Chinesische Freundschaft, 1979); Liu Zhide et al., *Huxian nongminhua* [Peasant paintings from Huxian] (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1974); *Huxian nongminhua* [Peasant paintings from Huxian] (Tianjin: Tianjin renmin meishu chubanshe, 1975); Galikowski, *Art and Politics in China*, 155.
47 Galikowski, *Art and Politics in China*, 156–157.
48 Laing, *The Winking Owl*, 82–84; Jutta Bewig, 'Huxian – die Heimat der Bauernmalerei' [Huxian – home of peasant painting], in Bewig (ed.), *Bauernmalerei aus Huxian*, 15–18; Galikowski, *Art and Politics in China*, 155, 157; Li Fenglan, 'How I Began to Paint the Countryside', *China Reconstructs* (January 1974), 23, http://chineseposters.net/resources/li-fenglan-how-i-began-to-paint-the-countryside.php (accessed 16 December 2016).

49 Chinese Posters Foundation, Li Fenglan, http://chineseposters.net/artists/lifenglan.php (accessed 14 November 2018).
50 Li, 'How I Began to Paint the Countryside', 23.
51 C. A. S. Williams, *Outline of Chinese Symbolism & Art Motives* (1931; New York: Dover, 1976), 380–381; Wolfram Eberhard, *A Dictionary of Chinese Symbols* (London: Routledge, 1986), 280.
52 Ashton, 'Huxian's Foolish Old Men', 45, 46, 51.
53 Barbara Mittler, '"Enjoying the Four Olds!" Oral Histories from a "Cultural Desert"', *Transcultural Studies*, 1 (2013), 203.
54 Mittler, '"Enjoying the Four Olds!"', 205–206; David Holm, *Art and Ideology in Revolutionary China* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 51–55.