

CONSTRUCTING COMMUNISM

Teaching about Revolutionary Societies through Chinese Poster Art

By Steven F. Jackson



我們為參加國家工業化建設而自豪

Figure 1: Ning Hao's "We Are Proud of Participating in the Founding of Our Country's Industrialization." Students who are learning Chinese may note the older, full-form characters (*fantizi*), indicating that the poster predates the first simplification of Chinese characters in 1956. All figures in this article are courtesy of the IISH/Stefan R. Landsberger Collection, available at <http://chineseposters.net>.

Editor's Note: Readers may view the posters in this article in color at <http://chineseposters.net> as well as get information on obtaining reprints. Please also see the recommend resources at the end of this article for additional materials on political posters.

The images are striking: Brilliant smiles on happy peasants, proudly driving their tractors, harvesting their crops, fields bright yellow with grain. Workers in steel mills, their serious faces illuminated by orange glowing metal. Soldiers, airmen, sailors in their green and white uniforms, sternly on guard, holding their weapons and red books against an unseen enemy. A happy family, enjoying urban prosperity under the all-seeing gaze of Chairman Mao Zedong. Angry youth contemptuously smashing antique objects with a sledgehammer. Brilliant sunrays emanating from the glowing face of the chairman, and splashes of blues, greens, and browns are dominated by brilliant reds. The propaganda posters of the People's Republic of China (PRC) are among the most interesting artifacts that capture the sense of what the Chinese Communist Party wanted ordinary citizens to do and think, particularly during the period from 1949 until the 1980s, when their role in Chinese state-society relations declined. The subject is as remote for contemporary American students' understanding as the images are visually striking: a society under the direction of a Communist Party seeking to change into an egalitarian country, led by a man who died before they were born. The images current students have of China are different and powerful in their own right: Twenty-first-century skylines. Prosperity. Pollution. An iconic line of tanks threatening a lonely, defiant figure. But to understand the politics, society, and history of modern China, students must make a journey into a place that is radically different from their own surroundings and context, and Chinese poster art is one vehicle to help them along the way. And especially since President Xi Jinping just officially elevated himself to the august heights of Mao at the nineteenth Communist Party Congress in October 2017, it seems to be a good occasion to remind students of exactly who Mao was and what his era was like.

And the vast difference between the attractive images shown in the posters and the grim reality of China from 1949 to the 1980s is an important lesson in itself. Needless to say, both textbooks and lectures are needed to remind students that the reality of Maoist China was much different from these images, and the posters hide horrors on a scale that few Americans can fully grasp: the 1958–1961 Great Leap Forward resulted in a famine that cost between twenty-three and fifty-five million lives, well-summarized by Clayton Brown's "China's Great Leap Forward";¹ the 1966–1976 Cultural Revolution resulted in millions of people persecuted and tortured, their lives shattered like so many Ming vases and family heirlooms condemned as "bourgeois." It cost an entire Chinese generation its chance at higher education, something American students will want to consider.

Other authors have discussed the use of propaganda in teaching, such as Benita Stambler's "The Electronic Helmsman," that focuses in particular on the image of Mao in Chinese posters, of which there is no shortage.² These posters can be used in a variety of courses both university and secondary, in comparative politics survey courses and modern world history courses. I teach the Maoist period in my upper-level undergraduate course on East Asian politics. We look at the political campaigns and movements mostly through the portrayal of ordinary Chinese in these posters—the workers, peasants, soldiers, Red Guards, intellectuals, women, young, and old. Stambler's piece and this one use the same source: the poster collection of University of Leiden Emeritus Professor Stefan Landsberger. Since Stambler's piece was published, the collection, which was once housed at the International Institute of Social History (IISH) in Amsterdam, has moved to its own site at <http://chineseposters.net> and has acquired thousands more images, including 5,500-plus additional images on Flickr.³ Landsberger's collection is easily the largest in the world (though there are other fine collections available on the web) and particularly useful for teaching purposes; the titles and Chinese text are translated into English, their dates of publication included, and the context given. The site also has categories and major periods, making it easy to approach the subject topically or chronologically. Among the categories I find most useful are "Campaigns 1949–1965," which includes early campaigns such as land reform, the first



Figure 2: "Women Can Hold up Half the Sky; Surely the Face of Nature Can Be Transformed" (Wang Dawei, 1975).

Five-Year Plan, and the Great Leap Forward; and "Campaigns 1966–1976," which is mostly about the Cultural Revolution. Other useful categories include "Models and Martyrs," "Villains," and "Iron Women, Foxy Ladies," which focuses on the contradictory images of women in posters. The site is academic, "a platform for the presentation of authentic documentary and historical information without the aim to propagate or dispute any political views." It is nonprofit and does not sell poster art. Digital use of the posters for noncommercial, private, educational, or scholarly/scientific purposes is allowed, with notification.

Classroom Discussion

Developing a number of themes while teaching with these posters is aided by a few prompts and tips. Patience and a laser pointer to highlight the small but significant details help. These posters were originally designed for an audience that was semiliterate, and a few basic symbols that were commonly used should be pointed out: People (often male) in blue overalls with a blue "liberation"-style cap are usually workers; figures with checked blouses (invariably female) or turbans are peasants; uniforms are obvious, but this Maoist "holy trinity" of workers–peasants–soldiers may not be. Eyeglasses signify intellectuals; a slight moustache and a few extra lines indicate an older man. Hair in a bun indicates an older woman. A red armband with yellow calligraphy shows a Red Guard. Ethnic minorities have distinctive dress and appearance, and are often shown in groups. The bright, multicolored *pangden* (apron) identifies Tibetan women. During this exercise (usually spread across two days), students have a handout with seven basic prompts to consider:

1. What do you see? What does it mean? What is the message? (you are not expected to understand the Chinese characters)
2. Think about issues of gender roles and relations; what does it say about the status of women?



Figure 3: "Go Towards the Communes! We Are Forging Ahead on the Socialist Road!" (Zhang Wenxin, 1955).

3. Do the posters imply anything about generational issues, the relations of old and young?
4. Pay attention to the sense of change, both within single posters and between multiple posters from different times in Maoist and post-Maoist China in four broad periods: post-1949 social change, the Great Leap Forward (1958–1961), the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), and post-Mao period (1976–present).
5. Look for images of unity; look for figures who may be ethnic minorities.
6. Pay attention to images of division/disunity; are there "enemies," either visible or unseen? How are they portrayed?
7. Try to find simple symbols that convey who or what is being portrayed.

The Posters

A poster showing gender roles is Ning Hao's "We Are Proud of Participating in the Founding of Our Country's Industrialization" (1954, Figure 1). The poster captures the moment a welder, initially indistinguishable in gender, lifts her welder's helmet; the surprise is meant to remind viewers that their expectations should be reexamined in this new society.

Figure 2 is another example of a poster that develops a gender theme. The poster shows a young woman dressing a stone, with a structure in the background, likely an aqueduct. The poster's message defies convention not only with the woman in a traditionally male role of stonecutter, but also in that the electric lights in the background show construction work being done at night. The phrase "Women hold up half the sky" is attributed to Mao.

Youth and age is another theme often seen in posters, with younger Chinese helping the older generation understand the new, whether light bulbs, loudspeakers, new Chinese characters, or policies. The poster by Zhang Wenxin (1955, Figure 3) is particularly noteworthy. A young girl, identified as a Young Pioneer by her red scarf, leads a group of adults and a cow by its nose ring. The young man's smile indicates enthusiasm, while an older man looks at a piece of paper (possibly a land deed). The poster specifically promotes the 1955 agricultural collectivization program (well-described by Brown) in which peasants were encouraged to join small cooperatives and pool their tools, livestock, and land. The poster also seems to criticize the apparent reluctance of some Communist leaders to push ahead, which Mao described as "some of our comrades, tottering along like a woman with bound feet, are complaining all the time, 'You're going too fast, much too fast.'"⁴



Figure 4: “Chairman Mao Visits a Homemade Blast Furnace” (Zhou Xuefen and Yin Quanyuan, 1958).

The relative success of the 1955–1956 agricultural collectivization convinced Mao that China could be driven further and faster. Industrialization had been a constant poster theme beginning in 1949, and views of factories, workers, and blast furnaces were ubiquitous. During the Great Leap Forward (1958–1961), an effort to double steel production in a single year gave rise to “backyard blast furnaces,” one of which is shown in Figure 4 with Mao (in shirtsleeves due to the heat) observing the production.

One worker with a long pole is removing slag from the bottom of the furnace while another douses it with sand as the pig iron slowly descends into the bosh (melting zone). The production output on the chalkboard is up, a clock is ticking above it, and workers with ore and coke wait impatiently for the heat to finish before recharging the furnace. Iron “pigs” are stacked and awaiting transport, while a worker explains this process to Mao, with officials looking on admiringly. The reality of the Great Leap Forward, however, was tragic. As Brown points out, Mao’s effort to simultaneously push forward agricultural collectivization in the form of communes and steel production ran up against the concerns of other party leaders that the effort had met its limits. Mao refused to listen and at the 1959 Lushan conference purged those who saw and spoke out about what was happening. Mao dictated that the Great Leap would continue, and starvation set in. Some estimate the death toll in China’s countryside at *twenty-three to fifty-five million people*. By 1962, Mao stepped away from daily policymaking, unapologetic, while China slowly recovered.

“Model” workers and soldiers is another theme that was meant to impart a clear lesson to Chinese citizens during the Maoist Era, just as it had been in the Soviet Union.⁵ “Iron Man” Wang Jinxi—a construction worker who selflessly worked to open China’s first oil field at Daqing in 1960—was a popular subject. The poster by Ha Qiongwen (Figure 5) not only captures Wang’s irrepressible optimism in frigid conditions, it also subtly shows a glimpse of Maoist reading material in his pocket. Students may also note the use of pinyin spelling below the Chinese characters.

The turmoil of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) is a rich topic for analysis. Alarmed by the policies of 1962–1965 that were meant to recover from the disastrous Great Leap but which he saw as dangerously “revisionist,” Mao called for the youth of China to smash “bourgeois thinking,” traces of old culture, and hidden opponents to his directives. Beginning in 1966, the ubiquitous smiles in posters disappear, and themes of struggle against internal foes dominate the posters, many of which show simpler colors of black, white, and of course red, as if to make the contrast even more stark. A classic of this genre is a 1967 poster from Beijing, artist unknown (Figure 6).



Figure 5: “Study the Spirit of Daqing” (Ha Qiongwen, 1965).

Many of the objects in the lower left corner being smashed under the Red Guard’s foot are recognizable to American students: a Buddha, a crucifix, a phonograph record, and dice. Many of the posters in the period feature the faces of “class enemies,” major Chinese leaders who were purged in the Cultural Revolution. Some of these may be a bit obscure for undergraduate teaching, but the portrayal is the key part: small figures, unhappy, almost inhuman faces, red “X”s across their caricatures.

By 1971, the holy trinity of workers, peasants, and soldiers once again smiles in an image of China advancing after the “victory” of the Cultural Revolution, as seen in an unknown artist’s “Industry Learns from Daqing, Agriculture Learns from Dazhai, and the Whole Country Learns from the People’s Liberation Army” (1971, Figure 7).⁶ The soldier in the middle is easily identifiable, and the worker is symbolized by the wrench. The man on the right’s white cloth turban and traditional tunic make him identifiable as a peasant.

After the death of Mao and the economic reforms under Deng Xiaoping that began in 1978, posters declined as a medium of Communist Party propaganda. But the transition still required some messages. Foreigners had generally been a minor feature in Chinese propaganda. During the Cultural Revolution, waves of angry people around the world—often prominently featuring Africans—rebellious against imperialism were common in posters. But in the 1980s, posters began to show foreigners *in China*, males dressed in suits and women in national costumes, showing that the country was opening. The theme of opening and welcoming outside influences can be seen prominently in “Special Economic Zones—China’s Great Open Door” (Figure 8), which shows massive red doors resembling those of the Forbidden City opening onto a modern vista of skyscrapers and a banner of other countries’ flags.



Figure 6: "Destroy the Old World; Establish the New World" (1967).

Student Reactions

The use of posters has been very successful in getting undergraduates to place themselves in Maoist China, to understand it on its own terms and in its own context. Unlike the black and white photos of the era, the colorful posters seem to hold their attention. The exercise also yields some spontaneous insights, and I often find students seeing something in these posters I had not previously noticed or considered. Among the most recent student comments collected about posters (fall 2017):

"The message is secondary to the image. Mass mobilization is . . . key to creating a modern China."

"The images . . . enlightened me on the ever-changing strategy of Mao and his successors. The images were full of nationalism and collective hope . . ."

"They taught Chinese what to expect of Mao and his government, to love Mao, to participate, and to follow his word."

"China during the Maoist period seems to have been very controlled. All the posters that we saw during this period were meant to convey messages or teach citizens how to think or act."

"At the time of issue, the purpose of these posters is to mobilize by telling citizens that it was the creation of a new society; the posters would ideally create a self-fulfilling prophecy. The posters teach us that Maoist China was very serious about inspiring people to follow the party example and to create a 'good' Chinese person."

"It showed a particular image of China moving forward, whether it was the poster that introduced electricity or denouncing old Confucian thought."

In the ten years I have been using propaganda posters to teach about the Maoist period in China, student reactions have been highly positive,



Figure 7: "Industry Learns from Daqing, Agriculture Learns from Dazhai, and the Whole Country Learns from the People's Liberation Army" (1971).



Figure 8: "Special Economic Zones—China's Great Open Door" (Sun Yi, 1987).

the classroom sessions engaged, and the discussion active. It is also possible to work with other countries' propaganda posters, either in courses on comparative communism, where the wealth of Soviet poster art makes for good comparisons, or in the study of Asian communist countries. There are good sources of Vietnamese propaganda posters (see the recommended resources below) that develop similar themes in many cases, and North Korean propaganda art, once you get beyond the shrill anti-American themes, looks surprisingly similar to Maoist Era Chinese posters. ■

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Bonnell, Victoria E. *Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Posters under Lenin and Stalin*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.

Brown, Clayton D. "China's Great Leap Forward." *Education About Asia* 17, no. 3 (2012): 29–32.

"Propaganda, Politics, History, Art: The International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam, and Stefan R. Landsberger Collection." *Chinese Posters*, last modified October 28, 2017, <https://chineseposters.net/index.php>.

"Chineseposters.net." Flickr. Accessed March 25, 2018. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/chinesepostersnet/albums>. This Flickr account contains around 3,300 Chinese posters and also includes a small number of papercuts.

Heather, David. *Vietnam Posters: The David Heather Collection*. Munich: Prestel, 2009.

Heather, David, and Koen De Ceuster. *North Korean Posters: The David Heather Collection*. Munich: Prestel, 2008.

Jargalan, Bat-Orgil. "Stoneblock Posters." *BlogSpot*. Last modified March 17, 2015. <http://stoneblockposters.blogspot.com/>. This is a small blog site showing some of the posters from Mongolia from 1961 to the 1980s.

Landsberger, Stefan R. *Chinese Posters: The IISH-Landsberger Collections*. Munich: Prestel, 2009.

Mao, Zedong. "On the Co-Operative Transformation of Agriculture." *Selected Works of Mao Tsetung*, vol. 5. Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1977. Accessed January 21, 2018. <https://tinyurl.com/yacsjue6>.

Mao, Zedong. "You Are Models for the Whole Nation." *Selected Works of Mao Tsetung*, vol. 5. Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1977. Accessed January 21, 2018. <https://tinyurl.com/yc4c2997>.

Stamler, Benita. "The Electronic Helmsman." *Education About Asia* 9, no. 1 (2004): 36–38.

"Art Poster Shop, Hanoi, Vietnam." *Vietnam Propaganda*. Accessed March 25, 2018. <https://www.vietnampropaganda.com/>. A Vietnamese poster online store that is much better than most "propaganda posters for sale" sites that contain little information about the posters (sometimes not even a translation of the text). This one has extensive English-language commentary about the subjects discussed in the posters. I have visited the store in Hanoi and purchased small-scale reproductions there.

Wolf, Michael. *Chinese Propaganda Posters*. Cologne: Taschen, 2015.

NOTES

1. Clayton D. Brown, "China's Great Leap Forward," *Education About Asia* 17, no. 3 (2012): 29–32.
2. Benita Stamler, "The Electronic Helmsman," *Education About Asia* 9, no. 1 (2004): 36–38.
3. "Propaganda, Politics, History, Art: The International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam, and Stefan R. Landsberger Collection," *Chinese Posters*, last modified October 28, 2017, <https://chineseposters.net/index.php>.
4. Mao Zedong. "On the Co-Operative Transformation of Agriculture," *Selected Works of Mao Tsetung*, vol. 5, Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1977, accessed January 21, 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/yacsjue6>.
5. See Mao's brief but appropriate speech in 1950, "You Are Models for the Whole Nation." Available on the *Marxists.org* website at <https://tinyurl.com/yc4c2997>.
6. Daqing (大庆) is an oil field in northeast China, established in 1960, and became the "model" industrial plant (as well as having the model industrial worker, Wang Jinxi, seen in Figure 5). Dazhai (大寨) was the "model" agricultural commune in Xiyang, Shanxi Province. Students studying basic Chinese should be able to recognize the character 大 *da* ("big") in each of the names.

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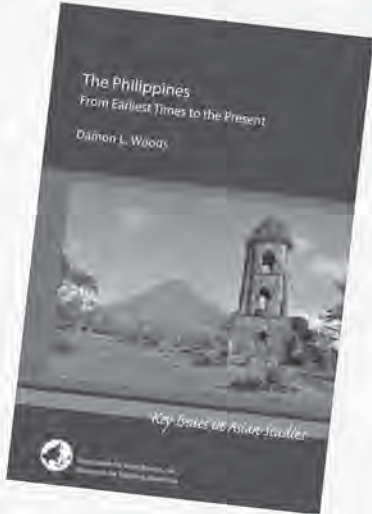
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