

Recreating a Nationalist Movement through Symbols

By Lesley Solomon

Mahatma Gandhi and Mao Zedong, arguably the two most influential Asian nationalist leaders of the twentieth century, used political symbols to refashion nationalist movements begun by Western-influenced elites. Imbued with the stated ideals of British democracy, English-speaking Indians established the Indian National Congress in 1885 with the objective of gaining more participation in government, rather than overthrowing the Raj.

In the early twentieth century, Sun Yat-sen's Nationalist Party drew inspiration from both socialism and Western democracy. In the aftermath of the 1919 May Fourth Movement, nationalist leaders characterized Westernization as "Mr. Science" and "Mr. Democracy." Ultimately, both Gandhi and Mao developed powerful symbols to reject the West and create a new national vision. It should prove useful for students to understand the ways Gandhi and Mao used symbols to reshape elitist national movements. Such a study will also help students analyze how contemporary political leaders use symbols, both positive and negative, to shape public opinion.

GANDHI

Rejecting Development, Extolling the Peasants

Choosing the machine as a concrete symbol, Gandhi portrayed industrialization as the impetus for the West to dominate the world; in contrast, he celebrated the simple lives of Indian peasants. According to Gandhi, "the multiplication of wants and machinery contrived to supply them" served

It is useful for students to contrast the images of Gandhi draped in simple white cloth, sometimes naked from the waist up, with pictures of him dressed in a Western suit as a young lawyer in South Africa.



Gandhi in Johannesburg, South Africa, in 1908. Source: Page 33 in *Gandhi* by Peter R  he. © 2001 Phaidon Press Limited.

to "increase animal appetites," causing Europeans to "go to the ends of the earth in search of their satisfaction."¹ Cloth goods imported from Europe became the most tangible symbol of Gandhi's campaign against British domination. By 1930, Gandhi's pressure for a boycott of foreign cloth had fostered a sharp decline in the sales of foreign goods in the major cloth centers of Amritsar, Delhi, and Bombay. Even more dramatic and controversial was the Mahatma's call for patriotic Indians to reject Westernization by symbolically burning all foreign cloth. Rabindranath Tagore, a Nobel Prizewinning poet and Indian nationalist, wrote an important critique of this campaign. Although Tagore admired Gandhi, he strongly criticized the bonfires, as well as the anti-intellectual aspects of the civil disobedience campaign. The two had public as well as private correspondences about their disagreements. In a letter published in *Modern Review* in 1921, Tagore deplored Gandhi's call for all Indians to "spin and weave, spin and weave."² In a concise paragraph, he explained his opposition to the bonfires:

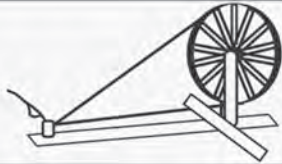
*Firstly, because I conceive to be my first duty to put up a valiant fight against this terrible habit of blindly following orders—Secondly I feel that the clothes to be burnt are not mine, but belong to those who most sorely need them. If those who are going naked should have given us the mandate to burn, it would, at least, have been a case of self-immolation and the crime of incendiarism would not lie at our door. But how can we expiate the sin of the forcible destruction of clothes which might have gone to women whose nakedness is actually keeping them prisoners, unable to stir out of the privacy of their homes?*³

In his prescient letter, Tagore warned against using powerful symbols to appeal to emotion rather than reason.

As a substitute for the Westernized ideals of the Indian National Congress, Gandhi proposed the preindustrial Indian village as the ideal economic and political model. Choosing the *charkha*, or spinning wheel, as the symbol of his new nationalist movement, he asserted that the spinning wheel was "the only universal means of attaining India's economic salvation."⁴ It is useful for students to contrast the images of Gandhi draped



Gandhi spinning, c. 1920s. Source: Page 68 in *Gandhi* by Peter R  he. © 2001 Phaidon Press Limited.



Flag with the charkha (spinning wheel) symbol adopted by the Indian National Congress in 1931. Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <http://tinyurl.com/zbq4ah5>.

in simple white cloth, sometimes naked from the waist up, with pictures of him dressed in a Western suit as a young lawyer in South Africa. On the Internet, students can find many iconic photographs of Gandhi and the charkha, including one by Margaret Bourke-White, published in *Life* magazine. Addressing the important problem of the role of religion in the nation he envisioned, Gandhi stood resolutely for tolerance. Rejecting aspects of the caste system, especially untouchability, Gandhi explained, “In God’s eyes all His creatures must be equal.”⁵ He became a living symbol of these beliefs by welcoming untouchables into his ashram and doing their traditional tasks himself. Working tirelessly for Hindu-Muslim unity, Gandhi even remained open to a referendum on a separate Muslim nation. However, he described the spirit of his movement as “the quintessence of the *Bhagavad-Gita* and which every verse of the Gita is saturated with this kindness, this love, this charity, is slowly but steadily gaining ground in the hearts of the masses of this country.”⁶ Certainly, Gandhi created for the future nation a symbolic vision based on an idealized and decidedly Hindu tradition.

MAO

Marxism with Chinese Characteristics

Like Gandhi, Mao Zedong established the idealized peasant as a symbol for the new China. Rejecting aspects of orthodox Marxism early in his career, Mao signaled his intention of leading a nationalist movement. However,



Chairman Mao with peasant workers. Source: <http://tinyurl.com/z4rxjxn>.

nationalism in Communist China would not rely on Western models. In an early speech, Mao chastised Marxist-Leninist scholars “who cannot open their mouths without citing ancient Greece, few of who know the history of the Communist Party of China and the history of China in the hundred years since the Opium War.”⁷ Modifying Marxist orthodoxy, Mao maintained that the peasants would be the vanguard of communism in China, an underdeveloped country with an overwhelmingly rural population. In an influential “report” on the peasant movement in Hunan in 1927, Mao described a “colossal event” in which “several hundred million peasants will rise like a mighty storm, like a hurricane, a force so swift and violent that no power, however great, will be able to hold it back. They will smash all the trammels that bind them and rush forward to liberation.”⁸ After the epic Long March when the Communists were attempting to escape Chinese Nationalist forces, Mao built his base of support in the countryside for the long war against the Japanese and Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalist troops that ended in Communists ascending to power in 1949.

The propaganda posters of the Cultural Revolution represent an excellent source for analysis of political symbols.



1969 poster translation: “Educated youth must go to the countryside to receive reeducation from the poor and lower-middle peasants!” Source: Stefan Landsberger’s *Chinese Propaganda Poster Pages* at <http://tinyurl.com/h4ys7v3>.

It is important to provide students with sources that describe the real fate of the Chinese peasantry during the 1949–1976 Maoist Period. In the 1958–1962 Great Leap Forward alone, historians estimate that Mao’s failed policies for the countryside caused the starvation deaths of twenty million people, half of them children.⁹ This is a conservative estimate, and several scholars assert the total number of deaths to be approximately thirty million.

Emphasizing the symbolism of the cult of the peasant during the 1966–1976 Cultural Revolution, Mao launched an all-out attack on intellectuals. In a stunning reversal of Chinese tradition, Mao and his cohorts sent intellectuals, professional people, and political enemies to work in the countryside and learn from the peasants. The propaganda posters of the Cultural Revolution represent an excellent source for analysis of political symbols. One such poster published in *China and the World: A History Since 1644*, urged patriots to “Go to the countryside; Go to the borderland—Become educated by the once-poor and low-middle-class peasants; take roots in the countryside for the Revolution.”¹⁰

Mao demonized the West throughout his rule, and the symbolic destruction of Western values became a major focus of the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution. Gangs of young people entered private homes where they destroyed collections of Western books, art, and music. In Dai Sijie's autobiographical novel, *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*, two adolescents, sent to the countryside for reeducation, covet their friend's cache of forbidden Western books. When the protagonists gain access to the novels, they learn the secret of the individual will, which they pass on to the little seamstress, the object of their desire. This coming-of-age novel, which contains both humor and realistic depictions of conditions in the countryside during the Cultural Revolution, works well with high school students and undergraduates. For middle school students, Ji-li Jiang's memoir, *Red Scarf Girl: A Memoir of the Cultural Revolution*, portrays the persecution of her "counterrevolutionary" family for listening to foreign broadcasts and possessing "bourgeois" books. In combination with a variety of primary source accounts of the Cultural Revolution, both the novel and the memoir illustrate such historical themes as scapegoating and prejudice, the cult of personality, the consequences of reeducation, and the use of propaganda to build a mass movement.

Additional Classroom Sources for Exploring Gandhi's and Mao's Uses of Symbolism

As this essay has illustrated, students can best study the use of political symbols by analyzing primary sources. For a study of Gandhi, I recommend the latest edition of *Sources of Indian Traditions, Vol. 2* for high school students and undergraduates.¹¹ Tagore's letter condemning the symbolic bonfires and Gandhi's appeal to emotion as opposed to reasoned analysis is a particularly useful primary source. Readers who do not have a copy of *Sources of Indian Tradition* should see endnote 3 for online access to the document. Students and teachers may also find specific contextual information about Gandhi in Judith M Brown's *Gandhi, Prisoner of Hope* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991). William Theodore de Bary and Richard Lufrano, *Sources of Chinese Tradition, vol.2: From 1600 Through the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999) remains a fine source of the selected writings of Mao. For both secondary students and undergraduates studying the Maoist Period, I highly recommend Primary Source's *China in the World: A History Since 1644* (Boston, Cheng and Tsui Co., 2009), which contains a fine selection of both print and visual sources, including the poster mentioned in this essay, as well as background material. The accompanying CD includes longer versions of the texts and color images. As a proponent of using literature in the history classroom, I have recommended introducing Dai Sijie's *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* (New York: Anchor Books, 2002) and Ji-Li Jiang's *Red Scarf Girl: A Memoir of the Cultural Revolution* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004, reprint) in combination with traditional historical sources. Please also see two much-used *Education About Asia* articles on The Great Leap Forward and The Cultural Revolution: Clayton D. Brown's "China's Great Leap Forward" from the winter 2012 issue and Deborah Pellikan, "The Chinese Cultural Revolution: Dynamic Times, Dramatic Lessons for Today's Kids" from the winter 2005 issue.

Symbols and Nationalism: Gandhi and Mao

A comparison of Gandhi and Mao's creation of political symbols may be used in various ways at the secondary and undergraduate levels. Since these leaders played a crucial role in the modern development of their nations, they are studied at both levels. Initially, the contrast between the two is most apparent. Gandhi's words inspired nonviolent movements throughout the world; Mao gained power through warfare and sanctioned the ruthless persecution of enemies. However, both men understood the importance of political symbols in inspiring masses of people, the majority

of whom were uneducated and divided geographically and culturally. Vilifying the West and their own Westernized countrymen, both Gandhi and Mao called for the symbolic destruction of Western values. Both leaders idealized, through symbolism, the rural peasantry that formed the basis of their support. Rejecting the value of analytical thinking, each used propaganda to inspire unquestioning loyalty to his cause. After studying the rise of nationalism in twentieth-century India and China, students might speculate on the lasting effects of both ideologies. Certainly, both men provided the crucial element in uniting their nations in the wake of Western incursions and, especially in the case of China, the ravages of World War II. However, their rejection of Western-style Capitalism ultimately proved ineffective in the modern world, as evidenced by China and later India liberalizing their economies through expanding private enterprise.

Both leaders left lasting legacies that still impact their respective nations today. Gandhi's use of Hindu symbolism may have resulted in India's contemporary political situation, which contradicts his inclusive nationalist ideal. Mao was primarily responsible for the unintended catastrophic consequences that ravaged the peasantry during the Great Leap Forward. The destruction during the Cultural Revolution of the intellectual class, and of educational and social institutions, brought China to the brink of disaster.

The creation of political symbols might also be used as one theme in a cross-cultural study of modern mass movements, of which the twentieth and twenty-first centuries provide many other examples. Hopefully, by studying how major world leaders have chosen and used political symbols, our students will understand how their own leaders shape public opinion through symbolism. ■

NOTES

1. Stephen Hay, ed., *Sources of Indian Tradition*, vol. 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 262.
2. Hay, 284.
3. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, *The Mahatma and The Poet: Letters and Debates between Gandhi and Tagore 1915-1941*, (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1997), 49. Retrieved from <http://tinyurl.com/jmjfuzw>.
4. Hay, 284.
5. Hay, 261.
6. Ibid.
7. *Selected Works of Mao* (Beijing Foreign Languages Press, 1971).
8. Primary Source Inc., *China in the World: A History Since 1644* (Boston, Cheng and Tsui Co., 2009), 158.
9. Ibid, 265.
10. Ibid, 245.
11. Rachel Fell McDermott, Leonard A. Gordon, Ainslie T. Embree, Frances W. Pritchett, and Dennis Dalton, eds., *Sources of Indian Traditions*, vol. 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

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