

THE ELECTRONIC HELMSMAN

Mao Posters on the Web

By Benita Stambler



Image courtesy of the IISH Stefan R. Landsberger Collection. <http://www.iisg.nl/~landsberger>

There can be no doubt that Mao Zedong played a major role in the People's Republic of China since its founding in 1949. Explaining his political stature and the cult of personality surrounding him to students is a challenge, since there are no comparable figures in American history. The adulation accorded Mao and his pervasive presence in Chinese society can be conveyed, however, through an examination of his portrayal in Chinese posters. Fortunately, several collections of these posters are available online, providing ready access to any classroom, teacher, or student with an Internet connection. The bright colors of the posters and their layers of meaning serve as useful tools for instruction from elementary through undergraduate levels. From a strictly visual standpoint, even young students can examine the perspective, placement, and depiction of Mao to understand his importance in China.

These approachable works of art can provide students an opportunity to apply basic concepts of analysis to images with a broad appeal. While some techniques used by the artists were complex, much of the meaning and symbolism will be obvious to a broad spectrum of students. The social, cultural, psychological, and political aspects of the art can also be explored. In my online learning class on modern China, I request that students select, for a brief analysis to be shared with classmates, one poster of Mao, explaining how the use of artistic/graphic techniques portrayed Mao's position in Chinese society.

Much of the poster art was a consequence of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, a decade of mass mobilization campaigns from 1966 to 1976. People in China needed a likeness of Mao to signal their political position; art, as almost all other aspects of life, had to reflect Mao Zedong Thought, so Mao's visage appeared often. Mao posters were icons, commonly-understood cultural conventions, and value-laden representations of ideals through symbols. One example that illustrates the prevalence of these is the *Morning Sun* site on the Cultural Revolution, created by the Long Bow Group, producers of award-winning documentaries on China. Its images page provides glimpses of Mao in fanciful groups that load individually, creating almost a visual shower of Mao images. Posters are mixed with buttons, badges, and photographs. The combination gives a sense of the supremacy of Mao, often referred to as the Great Helmsman of China, but masks the actual violence and chaos created by the Cultural Revolution, which was not widely understood outside China at that time.

One good site with easy access to a large numbers of posters featuring Mao is *Stefan Landsberger's Chinese Propaganda Poster Pages*, containing posters arranged by category, interspersed with text. There is a section entitled *The Mao Cult*, which has several dozen Mao posters, a bibliography, and even more specific sub-categories, such as *Chairman Mao Swims Across the Yangzi*. Mao posters appear in other sections of the site as well, included with other party and state leaders. In particular, the poster of *Chairman*

Mao Goes to Anyuan has a description by its artist, Liu Chunhua, explaining the symbolism he used. This description serves as a good prototype for student assignments, since it describes the approach of the artist, including such components as focus, scale, symbols, imagery, details, composition, portraiture, background, and intent.

Other sites have fewer posters, but may be valuable in other ways. *The Chairman Smiles* site provides a comparative perspective on Mao posters, found mostly on its Cultural Revolution pages. The Leaders category of the *China Posters Online* site, from the University of Westminster, presents Mao with his comrades. CNN's *Visions of China* has a Galleries section that contains some Cultural Revolution posters, two featuring Mao. Historian Patricia Ebrey, who wrote *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China*, has produced *A Visual Sourcebook of Chinese Civilization*, which includes a painting and a woodcut of Mao for comparison, with study questions.

Historically, from the Tang Dynasty (618–907) on, the three perfections—poetry, calligraphy and painting—were important skills for Chinese scholars. Mao posters bear little stylistic resemblance to either traditional landscape (or portrait) painting or calligraphy, providing a good jumpstart to a discussion of discontinuities in Chinese history. The posters and popular art were a major departure from classical tradition, since they incorporated Western art forms (based on socialist realism from the Soviet Union) and some Chinese folk elements.

The posters reflect a period, a point in time, but Mao's importance as a cultural and artistic icon continues, though often distorted by "China pop" artists such as Zhang Hongtu. Some of his renderings of Mao, made with grass or soy sauce, can be seen on the *MoMao* site. An instructive online article on the changing use of Mao symbols is *Once Again, Long Live Chairman Mao* by Orville Schell, author of several books on modern Chinese culture.

Posters depicting Mao can be compared to online portraits of traditional Chinese emperors to enhance the study of historical change and continuity in China. The *China the Beautiful* Web site has paintings of selected Chinese emperors in chronological order. These portraits can assist in generating a discussion of how similar or different Mao was from "traditional" Chinese emperors. For



Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan.
Image courtesy of the IISH Stefan R. Landsberger Collection.
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example, the portrayal of *Emperor Taizong* (626–649) of the Tang Dynasty, carried on a litter by attendants, could be used for a lesson on the role of the emperor (and Mao) in Chinese society. Also, these comparisons would lend themselves to a discussion of the political and social purposes of art through history, or Chinese history in particular. According to Stefan Landsberger, the European Sinologist who has amassed one of the largest collections of Chinese posters in the world and has researched them extensively, "The history and development of the Chinese propaganda poster is like the history and development of modern China itself."¹

For cross-cultural themes, older students can compare the iconography of Mao with common artistic representations of Napoleon, Gandhi, Lenin, or even George Washington, also available online. These comparisons are useful for examining the relationships between a culture, its attitudes toward leadership, and the attributes of leaders.

To continue the study of Mao in a context of the spread of Communism, comparisons can be made not only to depictions of Russian leaders during a similar period, but also to North Korea, which produced paintings and posters in this same socialist realism mode. (See, for example, *The Art of Propaganda: Nationalistic Themes in the Art of North Korea.*)

Visual representations of Mao can also be combined with Internet resources of Mao's literary output. His writings and speeches may be found on such sites as the *Mao Zedong Reference Archive*. The *CulturArtwork* site, since it combines poster art with Mao's poetry, can serve as a model for matching Mao posters with relevant excerpts from his works. Posters can also be related to Mao's principles defined in his 1942 *Talks at the Yanan Forum on Literature and Art*, in Volume III of the *Mao Tse-tung Internet Library*.

While there are many posters of Mao, they are just a fraction of all the Chinese posters available online. The lively, forthright presence of these works of art on the Internet makes them an accessible and rich resource for a variety of instructional purposes, at a broad range of levels. If, after your study, you want a lingering presence, there are several online sites with Chinese posters available for sale. Mao's presence on the wall of your classroom or office can be a constant reminder of his pedagogic legacy. ■



Chairman Mao trusted Chairman Hua completely; the People and Army warmly endorse him too.
Image source: *China Posters Online*, <http://home.wmin.ac.uk/china/maohua.htm>.

NOTE

1. Ning, Ou. *Interview with Stefan R. Landsberger*. <http://www.sonicchina.org/tr4-4.htm>

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China the Beautiful "Emperor Taizong," <http://www.chinapage.com/painting/tangtaizong2.html>

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CNN Visions of China "Posters from the Cultural Revolution," <http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/1999/china.50/site.map/> (see the Galleries section)

CulturEvolution "CulturArtwork," <http://www.ezlink.com/~culturev/CulturArt.htm>

International Institute of Social History "The Chairman Smiles: Chinese Posters," <http://www.iisg.nl/exhibitions/chairman/chnintro2.html>

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Stefan Landsberger's Chinese Propaganda Poster Pages "Chairman Mao Swims Across the Yangzi," <http://www.iisg.nl/~landsberger/swim.html>

Stefan Landsberger's Chinese Propaganda Poster Pages "The Mao Cult," <http://www.iisg.nl/~landsberger/cult.html>

The Atlantic online "Once Again, Long Live Chairman Mao," <http://www.theatlantic.com/unbound/flashbks/china/livemao.htm>

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