

## CHAPTER 8

# Chinese Propaganda Posters

### 8.0 Introduction

*Harriet Evans*

Chinese posters—such as the several hundred in the University of Westminster’s archive of the China Visual Arts Project— are invariably referred to both in China and abroad under the generic category of ‘propaganda posters’ (*xuan-chuanhua* 宣传画). One key assumption informing such a description is that between their image and slogan, posters conveyed a clear message, the meaning of which was immediately transparent to its viewers. Stephanie Donald argued that posters in the Mao era mediated the relationship between party propaganda and everyday experience by constituting a ‘red sea’, ‘an immersive aesthetic field through which the Party disseminated extraordinarily powerful visual metaphors for the revolution-in-progress’ (Donald 2014, 658).

Thinking about posters through this lens, however, is problematic, for a number of reasons. Recent scholarship has explored how propaganda should be seen as much more than a tool of coercive top-down governance: ‘it was also a window through which society became more legible, predictable and controllable’ to the political and bureaucratic elite (Farley and Johnson 2021, 4). Nor was there any automatic linear link between the intentions of propaganda producers and their publics. As Pang Laikwan argues, the ‘making of the propaganda involved much contestation and negotiation, and the reception and

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#### How to cite this book chapter:

Evans, H., Howat, F., Bellinetti, M-C. and Lin, C. 2021. Chinese Propaganda Posters. In: Kehoe, S. and Wielander, G. (eds.) *Cultural China 2020: The Contemporary China Centre Review*. Pp. 149–165. London: University of Westminster Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16997/book58.i>. License: CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0

production of it created even more discrepancies from central ideology' (Pang 2017, 14). Any cursory perusal of the posters in Westminster's collection, or for that matter in Stefan Landsberger's (1995), could support this argument. While most, if not all poster images, were accompanied by captions and slogans urging a particular response from the viewer, their immense variety—aesthetically, technically, in use of colour, and of course thematically—as well as the diversity of publics to whom they appealed would imply the impossibility of a uniform relationship between the poster and its multiple viewers. While the ultimate conceit in centrally directed poster production and dissemination might have been to thwart responses 'such as critique, desire, irony or resistance' (Donald 2014, 661), the public was far from the docile subject of such controls.

Little research has been conducted into viewers' responses to posters of the time, but there is some empirical evidence to support this argument. For example, Pang Laikwan (2017, 109) refers to how images of the beautiful female bare-foot doctor could evoke passionate longings on the part of a young man in the 1970s. A similar longing was described by male viewers' fan mail to Pan Jiajun, artist of the famous 1972 oil painting 'I am a petrel' (*Wo shi haiyan* 我是海燕) that I discussed in an earlier publication (Evans 2016, 94–95). Another reference is the evidence from the well-known Cantonese poster artist Zhang Shaocheng that choice of colour, line, and composition in conditions when editorial guidelines were extremely strict, could convey desires and longings that were obscured in the surface image of the poster, thereby creating space for different audience responses (Evans 2016, 97–98). In a more recent publication, Landsberger notes that peasants largely turned 'a blind eye to [the] political messages' of posters (Landsberger 2019, 214).

So, given the diversity and multiplicity of poster images across time, aesthetic composition and theme, what generalisations can be made about their status as powerful items of the visual culture throughout the entire Mao era? As Stephanie Donald and I (1999, 1–6) argued, the ubiquity of posters in public, work, and domestic spaces throughout the Mao era constituted them as a powerful visual discourse producing knowledge about key aspects of political and social life. One common thread running through all of them concerns their temporality. Whether in depictions of collective agriculture, industrial labour, health education, childcare or family life, posters all celebrated the bright future of socialism in images of hard work and commitment supported by symbolic references to transcendental authority depicted by rays of the red sun. Of course, one interpretation of this would derive from what one might call a postcolonial reading of the poster images, as a particular aesthetic component of the politics of culture celebrated by the newly independent government of the PRC. The postcolonial theorist and historian Robert Young argued some time ago that postcolonialism can be seen as 'a wide-ranging political project to reconstruct Western formations, reorient ethical norms, turn the power structures of the world upside down, refashion the world from below' (Young 2012, 20). In the proud moments of the early 1950s when many in China, and by no

means just the national leaders, were celebrating their ascendancy to a newly independent national stage, having defeated the forces of imperialism and colonialism, the poster scenes of crowds of energetic young workers and peasants marching towards a bright future could become images of celebration, or even happiness, as Maria-Caterina Bellinetti argues in her article included in this collection. Resituated in the context of their times they can be read as triumphant images of national and political success in taking on and challenging the international forces that since the nineteenth century had forcibly maintained China's subordination. Political and military victory was assured, if not by the bright red sun in the east, then certainly by the collective strength of class and ethnic unity. Alongside such scenes of celebration and pride, the grubbiness and scarcity of the present was absented from all images. The enemy, whether military or class, was only ever implied, unless it appeared in metaphorical or cartoon form.

Reflecting on the posters at the time of their production and display, there is thus a striking paradox between repeated references to them as fixed 'propaganda' and their diversity and complexity as an aesthetic form. This paradox is implicit in Amy Barnes' analysis of the British Library Collection of Chinese Posters, in which her generic reference to the propaganda of posters cannot account for the diverse range of styles and themes included in this small collection (Barnes 2020). It takes on a particularly poignant form when associated with the brutal distance between idealised poster images of abundance and fertility and ordinary people's real lives during the famine years of 1959–1962 (Galikowski 1998, 93–6) Cassie Lin's reflections included in this Review also show how posters from the less fraught period of the 1980s can trigger memories about a less difficult personal history and upbringing. These images from the 1980s are less often noted in the literature but seen together with earlier images, they provide interesting insights into changes in colour use and composition following the end of the Cultural Revolution.

Fast forward to the afterlife of the posters in the twenty-first century, a further paradox concerns why the images of posters repurposed and reproduced for commercial, artistic and educational purposes, have been reduced from their initial diversity and multiplicity to what appears to be a truly limited range. This range is coterminous with the dominant soundbites about the Mao era: the gender neutrality of bodily images, the uniformity of dress, and the predominance of an impassioned youth. Much the same is true of the countless artistic reimaginings (by many of the same artists) of Mao's image, which also work around a tiny cluster of themes. Mediated and remediated over the years for purposes as diverse as nightclub publicity, patriotic education, film, and fine art, the multi-layered meanings offered by the intricate and mobile combination of colour, line, composition, and slogan have effectively been distilled into dominant images of exuberant youth, arms raised in anticipation of future victory. Compare for example, the aesthetic of Westminster's image 'Revolutionary proletarian right to rebel troops unite!' with Wang Guangyi's 'Great Criticism WTO' (2005) (see



**Fig 8.0.a:** Left: National Fine Art Red Revolutionary Rebels Liaison Station. 1966. Revolutionary Proletarian Right to Rebel Troops Unite! Source: China Visual Arts Project, University of Westminster. Right: Great Criticism WTO (2005), by Wang Guangyi. Reproduced with the permission of the artist.

Fig 8.0.a.). It is worth bearing in mind, moreover, that these images appear in a cultural, media, and political environment in which critical public discussion about the Cultural Revolution is not permitted. Nor does the mainstream media environment in the West seem particularly interested in bringing to light the complex issues buried in unspoken memories and experiences of the recent past in China. It is therefore through this reduced range of images that young people growing up in China today, as well as non-specialist commentators in the West, come to comprehend what the Cultural Revolution was about. Given the widespread media slippage between the Cultural Revolution and the Mao era, the implications of this in narrowing down the historical narrative available to young people growing up in China today are even more serious.

Then there is the commodified, political and affective repurposing of posters as items within the generic category of China's 'red legacy'. Emily Williams (2017) has discussed the work of China's officially approved Red Collectors' associations and suggests that far from producing a coherent narrative of the Red Era, their efforts to collect and display 'red relics' 'fragment the very idea of narratives altogether'. For some collectors, it is quantity and taxonomical techniques that occupy pride of place in their collections. By contrast, the well-known pioneering collector Mr. Dong Zhongchao is inspired by a nostalgic desire to bring poster and 'relic' to life by pairing up poster image with the material object depicted in it and temporarily abandoning the contemporary emphasis on individual competition to return to a moment of greater equality associated with the Mao years (Williams 2017).

'Authentic' red relics now fetch sometimes spectacular prices, and indicate the extent to which the 'red' has ironically morphed into a fully commodified and profitable entity in which workers and peasants are no longer proud messengers of a new world, but reminders of a past that is politically silenced

as a site of critical enquiry. We recall the argument of the prominent Beijing-based feminist cultural critic Dai Jinhua who describes in her text 'Imagined Nostalgia' how nostalgic images represent a longing produced by the prevalent anxiety that imbues society and provide a temporary space of relief where the present is allocated to an imagined past (Dai 1997). Nostalgia and commercial interest are inextricably enmeshed in the work of the red collectors. If they are united in approaching collecting as a moral project linking the past with the present, this is not inconsistent in their view with their pursuit of commercial interests or political patronage (Williams 2017).

As the Chinese Communist Party celebrates its centenary year, the poster retains the aesthetic qualities that inspired its initial production, but is refashioned for audiences unable and unwilling to attempt to excavate what it signified at the time. However, it retains an importance as part of an invaluable historical archive that needs to be preserved, the painstaking work of which Freja Howat described in her article in this section. As direct references to the Cultural Revolution and the Great Leap Forward famine are excised in the new edition of *A Brief History of the Communist Party of China*, recently published to celebrate the CCP's centenary, the significance of the poster as a source of insights into a complex and difficult history becomes even more crucial to record and analyse. While the repurposing of poster art across different sites of creativity and market exchange—from fine art, the hospitality industry, to the treasured displays of the red collectors—cloaks the poster in mantles and temporalities that effectively disguise its initial purpose and focus on futurity, it points to ways in which different constituencies in contemporary China are in their different ways attempting to reveal rather than hide a difficult recent past.

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## 8.1 The Chinese Visual Arts Project: Graduate Work in Records and Archives

*Freja Howat*

Working over a period of five months in 2018–19, I joined the Records and Archives team at the University of Westminster to help implement the digitisation and digital preservation of its collections. Founded as the UK's first polytechnic institution, the University has collections spanning over 170 years. My role was, needless to say, varied.

When I told people that I worked in an archive, most people imagined me seated among a load of boxes in a dark, dusty strongroom. This was partly true, but popular visions of archives are based on myths that do not do service to the active labour that goes into providing access to collections via outreach and digitisation. Archives are not static repositories—the work around the University's Chinese Visual Arts Project exemplifies this point.

Founded in 1977 by the writer and journalist John Gittings, then Senior Lecturer in Chinese at the Polytechnic of Central London (now the University of Westminster), the collection comprises a staggering 843 posters acquired from Hong Kong and mainland China, dating from the 1940s to the 1980s, alongside a wealth of books, objects, and ephemera. The collection was used and built upon as a teaching aid for the Polytechnic's classes in Chinese language and politics and is still used today for similar purposes by Senior Archivist Anna McNally for a range of courses at the University of Westminster engaging with visual and material cultures. I worked with Anna to deliver outreach sessions designed to offer students a deeper understanding of the ways in which archives are constructed, and how collections are attributed with meaning and value.





**Fig 8.1.a:** Central Academy of Fine Arts Combat Team. 1967. Smash the Old World and Build a New One. Source: China Visual Arts Project, University of Westminster.

These sessions often engaged with the propaganda posters, which encompass a wide range of styles, responding to the frequent changes in the political climate. Created in the red and black graphic woodblock style that has become so synonymous with the Cultural Revolution, posters such as ‘Smash the Old World and Build a New One’ (1967) (Fig 8.1.a.) portray the elimination of China’s old traditions under the Communist regime. By the mid-1970s, these posters began to shift in style. More posters began to promote healthcare, education and industry such as ‘Put Birth Control into Practice for the Revolution’ (1974) (Fig 8.1.b.), a message that took on new significance following the introduction of the one child policy (1979–2015).

Accompanying these posters are a number of propagandist toys such as a puzzle cube of Vietnamese children planting a bomb for American soldiers (Fig 8.1.c.) and a pair of dolls that depict the Red Guards, a mass paramilitary social movement mobilised by Mao in 1966 and 1967, during the first phase of the Cultural Revolution (Fig 4). There are also objects that detail the everyday, such as bus tickets and receipts; pins featuring Mao; matchbooks depicting



**Fig 8.1.b:** Artist unknown. 1974. Put Birth Control into Practice for the Revolution. Source: China Visual Arts Project, University of Westminster.



**Fig 8.1.c:** Puzzle cube. c.1970. Source: China Visual Arts Project, University of Westminster.

Chinese monuments and lingerie (Fig 5). These materials have received less interest than the posters, yet they resonated with me as I felt they had just as much to say about the culture and politics of China during this period.

Whilst considering the transformation of political narratives overtime, students also reflected on the wider context by which the collection was formed and how it portrayed China from Western perspectives. It is for this reason that I became involved with digitising this aspect of the collection; to increase the visibility of the collection as a whole, which when seen in its wider context as a teaching aid also raises questions about what was then the Polytechnic of Central London; Why were these materials collected?; How and why did they inform study about China and its peoples? Questions surrounding the nature of the collection and how it came into being continue to grow and evolve as the collection is catalogued, distributed, and engaged with.

I set to work photographing these objects and played around with 3D modelling. Although we thought it could be an interesting way for researchers overseas to get an idea of the materiality of an object (Fig 6), producing 3D models





**Fig 8.1.d:** Red Guards, c.1967. Source: China Visual Arts Project, University of Westminster.



**Fig 8.1.e:** Bra. c.1966–1976. Source: China Visual Arts Project, University of Westminster.



**Fig 8.1.f:** Work in progress 3D Model of Red Guard Doll. Source: China Visual Arts Project, University of Westminster.

was not without its issues. Firstly, a 3D model does not replace the materiality of engaging with an object first-hand; secondly, not everyone has the expenses or access to a machine that is powerful enough to produce or view 3D models. This led me to think about lower tech solutions such as .gif making; accessible to anyone with a mobile phone. Without being able to physically handle the materials first-hand, this would at the very least improve access to the collection. In addition to this, the University of Westminster has recently implemented a new online catalogue which enables users the choice between English and Chinese. This is a development that will fundamentally alter the ways in which audiences engage with the collection and how it is managed.

By considering the ways in which this collection has been acquired and the channels by which it continues to be distributed, audiences are offered a new context for viewing the collection. It allows us to think critically about the appropriation of the word 'archive', about differences between digital and physical objects, and also about the accessibility of material and the impacts of digitisation on non-European collections that have been attributed Westernised standards of archival value.

### Note

A version of this piece was previously published on the History of Art and Design Blog, University of Brighton.

## 8.2 Women Model Workers and The Duty of Happiness in Chinese Propaganda Posters

*Maria-Caterina Bellinetti*

On February 14th, the death of Liang Jun was reported by international media (BBC 2020). Liang, a woman born from a peasant family in Heilongjiang in 1930, became a Chinese national hero thanks to her work as a tractor driver. During her life, Liang was glorified by state propaganda as a model worker and, in 1962, she became the face of the one yuan banknote where she is portrayed while driving her tractor. The glorification of working women was systematically employed by the CCP in its propaganda strategies in order to promote the Socialist cause and bring more women into the workforce. The story of Liang Jun, her popularity, and the use of her image prompts us to wonder what it means to look at the representation of women in Chinese propaganda posters on International Women's Day.

Women have been a central part of modern Chinese political discourse since the May 4th Movement between 1910 and 1920. Right from its birth in 1921 in Shanghai, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) welcomed the feminist ideology of the Movement and included in its political agenda the promotion of women's rights. In 1922, the Party embraced the celebrations for International Women's Day and with it the call for gender equality and the right for women to vote. A few years before, in 1919, a young Mao Zedong, also influenced by the May 4th Movement, had criticised the ways in which traditional Chinese society treated women. In his famous essay *Miss Zhao's Suicide*, Mao argued that Miss Zhao, a young girl promised in marriage to an old widower, did not actually commit suicide but was murdered by society. The three circumstances in which Miss Zhao found herself caged were Chinese society, her family, and the family of the man she did not want to marry. 'Within these triangular iron nets, however much Miss Zhao sought life, there was no way for her to go on living,' noted Mao (1919), 'The opposite of life is death, and so Miss Zhao was obliged to die.'

Despite the proclaimed good intentions and the attempts, some successful, to include and ameliorate women's living conditions, the Party fell short. Women's issues were frequently dismissed in favour of the Socialist Revolution or the freedom of the country—especially during the war against Japan—and this contributed to the prolonged, hard-to-overcome existence of patriarchy. Propaganda posters, just like other forms of visual representation such as woodcuts and photographs, were not an exception. Created by a Party and an ideology that were male-oriented, the posters presented a view on the world of women that did not correspond to and eventually failed to alter the status quo of Chinese society. Women's representation in posters was constructed through a male-gaze: when women were represented as leaders, they were in charge of other women, not men; when they were learning how to read and write, they were usually taught by their sons. Even if the Party was advocating for



**Fig 8.2.a:** Han Meilin 韩美琳. 1960. Hard Working Sister-in-law. Source: China Visual Arts Project, University of Westminster.



**Fig 8.2.b:** Fan Zhenjia 范振家. 1964. If You Want Blossoms Full of Foliage, Study Good Management Techniques. Source: China Visual Arts Project, University of Westminster.

women's equality, the visual representation of women remained stuck in the old narrative that presented them through their primary roles as mothers, sisters, and wives.

In the posters, women were predominantly young and beautiful, and their work efforts were directed to the family or the State. More interestingly though,



**Fig 8.2.c:** Wang Dawei. 1975. Women can hold up half the sky; surely the face of nature can be transformed. Source: China Visual Arts Project, University of Westminster.

they were always happy. When working in the fields or chiselling stone blocks with perfectly combed hair and red cheeks, a happy and determined smile appeared on their faces. Similarly, when women were portrayed while taking care of the family and performing their duties as wives, mothers, and daughters, they looked happy and gracious. In Communist visual propaganda, happiness lost its private connotation and became a public, national affair. Women were happy because, and thanks to, their work for the country and the Party. Being happy, therefore, became a duty.

The duty of happiness reads like an oxymoron, but, according to Gerda Wielander (2018), it was and still is a central part of the Chinese propaganda system. While, as Wielander (2018) argues, in the 1950s the focus of the Party was on ‘*building a happy society*,’ in more recent years ‘social stability and regime maintenance have become the main goal.’ The importance of happiness can be seen as part of the *emotion work* that characterised the CCP’s propaganda efforts since the Anti-Japanese War (1937–45). Defined by Arlie R.

Hochschild (1979, 561) as ‘the act of trying to change in degree or quality an emotion or feeling,’ *emotion work* was frequently used by the Party to create a sense of unity in the people and the hope for a bright, happy future under the guidance of the CCP. In her essay *Moving the Masses: Emotion Work in the Chinese Revolution*, Elizabeth J. Perry (2002, 120) noted that Mao Zedong believed that ‘mass ecstasy [...] was efficacious not only for revolutionary struggle, but for dramatic economic breakthroughs as well’.

Over the decades, women like Liang Jun were glorified by the Party for their work and family achievements and portrayed accordingly. Based on the awareness that a positive attitude and contagious enthusiasm were strong psychological weapons to mobilise the people in political and economic campaigns, the Party systematically exploited happiness throughout its visual propaganda. Women’s reality was not as joyous as modern Chinese propaganda depicted in the posters. Behind the smiles, the perfectly combed hair, and the rosy cheeks, Chinese women fought, struggled, and suffered as many of them have narrated in their memoirs. If in propaganda posters women’s happiness became a duty, in the real world it was too frequently an unreachable state or at least a very arduous journey.

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## 8.3 A Throw Back to School Days

*Cassie Lin*

Going to school in China can be quite different from the UK. The first time I noticed these differences was during my early days living in England. It was 3.30 p.m. on a weekday. I saw a bunch of schoolgirls storming through a shopping mall in the city centre, in their cute winter school uniform, nicely fitted



jacket, check skirt, white shirt and tie. They were all wearing make-up, beautiful long hair styled in different fashions, and shiny nail polish on their fingertips.

I was a little surprised for two reasons: 1. It was only 3.30 in the afternoon, are these girls are off school already? 2. Make-up is allowed?

I couldn't help but recall my own school days back in China. I spent six good years in one of the best secondary schools in our province. A renowned secondary educational institution, like my old school, normally comes with endless study hours, a hideous uniform, and countless student regulations. For example, having long hair was strictly forbidden; girls can only have their hair cut almost the same short length as boys, let alone wear make-up and accessories. And romantic relationships are not allowed; if 'young love' is found (that's how it was written in the student regulation handbook, as funny as it sounds), it could cause disciplinary action.

As a student in China, at least from my personal experience, your grade is your life, nothing else matters. There are quite a few fixed standards for being a 'Good Student' in China, but academic performance is surely the main one. In school, we normally start the day from 7.30 a.m. and finish by 9.30 p.m. with a 10-minute break between each class, and two-hour lunch and dinner breaks. It can be worse in senior years; students must sacrifice their weekends for mandatory studies in school.



**Fig 8.3.a:** Zhang Tianfang 张天放. 1982. Comply with School Discipline, Comply with Public Order, Comply with National Laws. Source: China Visual Arts Project, University of Westminster.

In the 1980s, China established the policy of ‘Nine-Year Compulsory Education’, which the government funds. It includes six years of primary education, starting at ages 6 or 7, and three years of junior secondary education (middle school) for ages 12 to 15. Most students choose to continue another three years of higher secondary education (high school) for ages 15 to 18. And after that, they will encounter the most challenging moment in their entire student life: The National Higher Education Entrance Examination, also known as *gaokao* 高考 in Chinese terms.

In modern China, *gaokao* is socially and culturally significant, and is much more than simply an university entrance exam. For some of the young students coming from a less competitive social background, *gaokao* is the ‘only way out’. From the beginning of a Chinese student’s school life, they will encounter a concept again and again from teachers, parents and peers, and that’s that ‘achieving a top grade in *gaokao* means ‘going to good a university’, then ‘having a high-paid job’ after graduation, and eventually ‘securing a richer social status’.

*Gaokao* is a payback for all those long study hours, numerous textbooks and papers, gender-blurred school uniforms and un-happened ‘young love’ over the years, if you get a good result in the end, of course. It’s an extremely harsh exam, with strictly secretive preparation, and immediate disqualification if an examinee is late or caught cheating. *Gaokao* gets a lot of national and international criticism in terms of the educational system it represents. It is criticised for overlooking the development of creative and diverse learning abilities among young students, and for encouraging monotonous repetition across a



**Fig 8.3.b:** Yu Zhenli 于振立. 1982. Get to School on Time, Do Not Be Late, Do Not Leave Early, Do Not Play Truant. Source: China Visual Arts Project, University of Westminster.



**Fig 8.3.c:** Artist unknown. 1980. Study. Source: China Visual Arts Project, University of Westminster.

select few academic subjects. However, in China, *gaokao* seems to be the only fair system so far, for students, coming from families rich or poor, educated in private or public schools, to pursue future opportunities by their own hands. They are placed on the same starting point when sitting this exam, their performance, and the final result are the only aspects that are going to determine which university they are attending and nothing else.

And after years, when we've finally grown up, we finally realise *gaokao* really wasn't the 'only way out,' there are a lot more other obstacles than just a bad exam result in life, we look back to the school days, and think maybe those days filled with endless exam papers are not so bad after all.