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CHINESE PROPAGANDA AND THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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Some of the most iconic images of the twentieth-century's People's Republic of China are of propaganda posters. These artistic renderings, featuring bright colors and depictions of powerful and productive members of society, have come to represent both the strength of the People's Republic of China and the hypocrisy and hidden corruption of the Communist Party. Designed to exemplify correct living and the hopes for the future of China under the People's Republic, propaganda posters became the most active form of political communication in China and were engaged in by all members of society. Propaganda posters were used as a vehicle to propagate Communist thought widely within and without China and were ultimately the most effective measure to gain rural peasant support for the Communist leadership. Once the Party had gained stable control over China, propaganda posters penetrated the lives of people at every level of society. This is particularly true of the period in which Mao Zedong led the Communist Party and were essential to his role in Chinese society. The impact of Mao Zedong and his ideologies in the early years of the People's Republic never would have come to be without the impact of Chinese propaganda posters.

Propaganda in Prospective

It is no exaggeration to say that the Communist Party uses propaganda in conceivably every form of media available to the Chinese public. The Communist

party uses newspapers, magazines, digital news media, universities and primary education classrooms, film, and museums to dispense propaganda.¹ These various vehicles for political ideological dissemination provide to serve two main purposes within the nation. They make for a propaganda state, where political ideology rules the majority, and thus one in which intellectuals are forced to self-censor. This reduces conflict within the state and encourages ideological purity. This purity is also enhanced by the secondary goal of propaganda in Communist China which is of proactive propaganda.² Proactive propaganda provides a blueprint of behavior and thinking that the party believes should be observed and repeated by the citizen population. Propaganda itself is viewed by the Communist party without the negative associations it is commonly given in Western culture.

The Western definition for the word "propaganda" is defined as: "information, especially of a biased or misleading nature, used to promote political cause or point of view".³ The term generally used within China, which was translated from the western word "propaganda" is *xuānchuán*. *Xuānchuán* (宣传) does not contain positive

¹ David Shambaugh, "China's Propaganda System: Institutions, Processes and Efficacy," *China Journal* 57 (Jan 2007): 27-28.

² Shambaugh, "China's Propaganda System," 29-30

³ "Propaganda." Oxford English Living Dictionaries Website. Accessed October 11, 2016. <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/propaganda>.

or negative connotations in Chinese culture. Instead, the word is a neutral term that is interchangeable for words like “information” or “advertisement”. The same term could be used to describe public health information pamphlets or a billboard advertising of the sale of cellphones. It is for this reason that “propaganda” does not have the same cultural legacy that it is associated with in the West. Because propaganda can be associated with the neutral broad dissemination of knowledge, it could then prevail as culturally significant and a long withstanding form of political communication.

Chinese Propaganda Afore the Chinese Communist Party

Propaganda posters within China are often historically associated with the People’s Republic of China, but truthfully, it was used well before the Communist Party (CCP) came into a central position of power. While it could be associated with dynasties of China’s past, it was more significantly employed by the Nationalist (Kuomintang) Party, the rival of the CCP during the Chinese Civil War. During the Second Sino-Japanese War, the Nationalist Party promoted several different series of propaganda posters that presented the image of the Nationalist army standing solely opposed to the Japanese. These include posters such as “Millions of People All of One Mind Vow to Exterminate the Japanese Enemy”⁴ and “We Live to Struggle for the Nation!”⁵, both published in 1937. Neither of these posters make any mention of the Chinese Communist Party, which the Nationalist Party had purged ten years prior

during the April 12th massacre in Shanghai⁶, despite the fact that the Chinese Communist Party had initially allied themselves with the Nationalist Party against the Japanese. Instead, the posters reflect the Chinese resistance as a Nationalist resistance. In the latter propaganda poster, “We Live to Struggle for the Nation,” the subjects of the image wave one flag only: the Nationalist flag. Eventually, pressure from Japanese forces would heavily weaken Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalist army, leaving room for the Chinese Communist Party to expand from their rural power base in Yan’an and take central control of mainland China, forming the People’s Republic of China.

Years later, once the Nationalist government’s power base was restricted to the island of Taiwan, the People’s Republic of China employed propaganda posters to maintain the constantly revolving series of campaigns which Mao Zedong believed were essential for Communism to be successful. Mao is quoted as saying, “Wherever the Red Army goes, the masses are cold and aloof, and only after our propaganda do they slowly move into action”.⁷ Under Mao, the Communist party engaged the population through propaganda posters to promote party approved role models for society to follow, create ideological monitors among the public, and control the media and educational system so that people on all levels of society could engage with the Communist message.⁸ The CCP’s power base resided with the peasantry through class struggle and mass revolution, so propaganda posters were especially effective in inspiring the often illiterate

⁴ Stefan R. Lansberger, “Millions of People All of One Mind Vow to Exterminate the Japanese Enemy,” *The Chinese Posters Foundation*, accessed April 23, 2014, <http://chineseposters.net/posters/pc-1938-011.php>.

⁵ Ibid., <http://chineseposters.net/posters/pc-1938-009.php>.

⁶ John King Fairbank and Merle Goldman, *China: A New History*, 2nd enlarged ed. (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 284.

⁷ Solomon, Richard H., *Mao’s Revolution and the Chinese Political Culture*, New ed., (Ewing: University of California Press, 1971), 236.

⁸ Shambaugh, “China’s Propaganda System,” 26-27.

rural masses.⁹ Propaganda posters also provided the feverish mass movement energy required for the regular rooting out of enemies among the people, which were often violent and virtually endless as Mao's paranoia grew towards the end of his life.¹⁰ For virtually every major campaign of the Communist Party's history there is a plethora of propaganda posters available to show how the Communist Party wanted that historical moment remembered by the Chinese population and how they wanted the citizenry to respond.

Exaggerated History and Hopes for the Future

The May-Fourth Movement provides an interesting example of the role of propaganda with historical memory. At the signing of the Treaty of Versailles, Japan was allowed to maintain control of Shandong, which had been previously occupied by the Germans during World War I. Chinese students immediately gathered in protest.¹¹ Though the Communist party did not play a direct role in the May Fourth movement, the party later liked to remember the protests as the spirit of revolution that inspired the party.¹² Printed in 1959, the "Develop the Revolutionary Spirit of the May Fourth Movement" poster commemorates the May Fourth's historical position in the Communist Party's history¹³; the subject of

⁹ Lincoln Cushing and Ann Tompkin, *Chinese Posters: Art from the Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution*, (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2007), 10.

¹⁰ Anne-Marie Brady, *Marketing Dictatorship: Propaganda and Thought Work in Contemporary China*, (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 1.

¹¹ Fairbank and Merle Goldman, *China: A New History*, 267-268.

¹² Rana Mitter, *A Bitter Revolution: China's Struggle with the Modern World (Making of the Modern World)* (New York: Oxford university Press, 2004), 18-19.

¹³ Landsberger, "Develop the Revolutionary Spirit of

the poster holds both the Socialist symbolic hammer and Mao's Little Red Book of Quotations.

During the mid-1930s, the Communist party was forced to flee their base in the Jiangxi province, over mountains and through swampland, pursued by the Nationalist army, which would be historically remembered as the Long March. As a result, the party received a massive blow in numbers, as more than 90% of its members were lost to warfare and environmental conditions.¹⁴ Upon the Party's reemergence as a national power in China, the Long March was crafted into an epic backstory for the Party that was highly replicated by propaganda artists. A prime example of this is a series of eight posters drawn up by Ying Yeping and Wang Huanqing in 1961 titled "An Arduous Journey".¹⁵ These posters idealize the Long March, showing images of uniformed, clean Communist marchers proudly baring the red flag before them in each poster. The propaganda posters fail to reflect the numbers of wounded, starving, and dead that suffered through the Long March.

The Communist Party has also used propaganda posters not only to remember its history, but to promote reform ideas intended for China's future. The Land Reform Movement of the 1950s revolved around the idea of the advancement of Chinese peasants through the dispossession of landlords and the destruction of landowning social elitism at the village level. Propaganda posters from this period, such as the "Mutual Help in Plowing has Brought

the May Fourth Movement," <http://chinese posters.net/posters/e39-689.php>.

¹⁴ Fairbank and Merle Goldman, *China: A New History*, 306-307.

¹⁵ Landsberger, "An Arduous Journey," <http://chinese posters.net/posters/pc-1961-006.php>.

in More Food”¹⁶ poster and the “Agricultural Cooperativization is the Socialist Course that Makes Everybody Prosperous”¹⁷ poster reflects the quixotic goals of cooperativization rather than the violent struggle meetings that were performed on landlords.

Progressing onward from the village run cooperatives, the Party moved to incorporate all property and its output into a strictly state controlled collectivization society. It was organized under the Great Leap Forward campaign, headed personally by Mao Zedong. The goal of the Great Leap Forward was to outpace Russian Communist successes by seeking a rapid transformation of Chinese agrarian landscape through industrialization. As the result of often exaggerated reports and the widespread planting of crops with industrial benefits instead of sustenance crops, the Great Leap Forward was a massive failure, resulting in the Great Famine and the death of millions of Chinese citizens from starvation.¹⁸ Both “The Commune is like a Gigantic Dragon”¹⁹ poster printed in 1959, designed to exemplify Chinese industrial output as more successful than the slow progress of the Soviet model, and “The Communes are Big”²⁰ poster from May 1960, featuring a young woman proudly holding more rice, fruit, and pork than she could carry alone, failed to accurately represent the failures of the Great Leap Forward. Propaganda posters from this period continued to exemplify

the hopes for the Movement in an effort to inspire the peasantry whose strength had already been sapped by two years of intense famine.

The Cultural Revolution and the Cult of Mao

The Cultural Revolution plays a unique role in the history of propaganda use by the CCP; it was during this period that Mao Zedong Thought was elevated to its grandest, larger than life, proportions. This campaign featured the goal of purifying Maoist and Communist ideology within the Party by rooting out capitalists and “old” traditions that still stood in the way of Party progress. Encouraged by Defense Minister’s Lin Biao’s promotion of the Little Red Book of Mao’s quotations, Mao’s persona had elevated to an almost cult-like status.²¹ Images of Mao, the rising sun, the Little Book of Quotations, and seas of red all came to symbolize Mao Zedong Thought, revolution, and the whole of Marxist Leninism.²² Propaganda posters and mass revolution had done well for the Chinese Communist Party and at its forefront, Mao Zedong.

The Chinese Communist Party used propaganda posters not only to sway favor towards the party within China, but internationally as well. Posters, printed on more durable paper designed to travel safely, printed messages in English, French, and German.²³ Many of the exported propaganda images sought to represent China as non-threatening political ally, especially in a position to protect neighboring states from the United States’ capitalist and imperial influence. By securing international allies, Chinese propaganda posters would serve as a force

²¹ Fairbank and Merle Goldman, *China: A New History*, 383-386.

²² Cushing and Ann Tompkins, *Chinese Posters*, 14.

²³ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, <http://chineseposters.net/posters/e13-917.php>.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, <http://chineseposters.net/posters/e15-29.php>.

¹⁸ Fairbank and Merle Goldman, *China: A New History*, 368-373.

¹⁹ Landsberger, “The Commune is like a Gigantic Dragon,” <http://chineseposters.net/posters/e13-593.php>

²⁰ *Ibid.*, <http://chineseposters.net/posters/e15-556.php>.

to protect blossoming Chinese economy and increase its diplomatic and political international influence.²⁴ Propaganda posters also played another vital role for the Communist Party: protecting the position of a specific population group believed to be essential to the success of Communism in China.

The Role of Women and Artists in the CCP

At the very forefront of the Chinese Communist Party's rise to power, women's liberation and equality were emphasized. The New Marriage Law, making wives equal to their husbands in marriage, as well as allowing them to seek out divorce²⁵, was celebrated in propaganda posters such as the 1953 poster, "In Marriage, Keep an Eye on Your Own Interests, and Return Radiant After Registration".²⁶ Liberated, strong Communist women graced images of the Long March, as proliferators of the successful commune, as technically skilled employees of China's industrial growth sectors, and as feminine homemakers who gave appreciation for all Mao and the Party had provided for her. The image of happy productive women playing an active role in the advancement of the Chinese cause may have been a genuine goal of Mao Zedong through Communism, but equality was never fully realized. In reality, women did often gain a position in industrial employment, but often these were lower paying positions.²⁷ Whenever one of the

²⁴ Joshua Kurlantzick, *Charm Offensive: How China's Soft Power is Transforming the World (A New Republic Book)*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 39.

²⁵ Fairbank and Merle Goldman, *China: A New History*, 349.

²⁶ Landsberger, "In Marriage, Keep an Eye on Your Own Interests, and Return Radiant After Registration", <http://chineseposters.net/posters/e15-556.php>

²⁷ Fairbank and Merle Goldman, *China: A New History*, 349.

Party's reform movements failed, women and children were the ones to suffer the most during hard times.

The positive and negative effects of mass propaganda as a form of political communication were weighed by Chinese writers during the early twentieth century. Wang Shiwei was an enthusiastic support of Mao Zedong, and took to his pen during the New Culture Movement. In 1942 he printed, "Political Leaders, Artists", in which he celebrated the position of artists as critics of society and government. He was an ardent believer that the Communist Party and the future of modern China required the work of both political leaders and artists to bring progress and balance to lead the revolution. In "Political Leaders, Artists," Shiwei said, "in the process of transforming the social system, the soul too is transformed...The tasks of the political leader and the artist are complementary".²⁸ Mao Zedong disagreed; Mao believed that it was art's position to serve politics, which he confirmed in a forum he gave on art and literature in Yan'an, May 1942. Mao said, "What we demand is unity of politics and art, of content and form and of revolutionary political content and the highest possible degree of perfection in artistic form".²⁹ Wang Shiwei was purged from the Communist Party that year and executed five years later. As a result of such interactions between Mao, the Party, and critics of Communist mass politics through propaganda posters, this particular vehicle of political communication has garnered both international fame and stereotype.

Conclusion and Future Study

From its neutral origins, *xuānchuán*, or Chinese propaganda, has had a unique

²⁸ WM. Theodore de Bary and Richard Lufrano, comp., *Sources of Chinese Tradition: From 1600 Through the Twentieth Century, Volume II*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 444.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 444.

position in the People's Republic of China's history. Propaganda has been used to capture the minds and hearts of the Chinese citizenry, providing snapshots into the behavior that was expected and what also must be avoided within the Party at any given time. Used in every major campaign associated with the Party, from the Long March to the Cultural Revolution, the rise and endurance of the Chinese People's Republic owes that status to the impact of political propaganda posters. Despite this lofty position, Chinese Communist propaganda posters have always been examined under a tight lens, receiving critique from opponents of the Communist party and Mao himself. The fate of the People's Republic of China was born and nurtured while intertwined within propaganda posters and the two remain ever linked in the frame of history.

What remains to be seen is how the Chinese Communist Party's relationship with propaganda will continue to evolve in the 21st century. These days, many of the slogans and printed posters appear archaic and puerile; in China today individuals are more commonly in contact with glossy billboards or brand-name film advertising for the Party. Modern Chinese propaganda seems to be taking on decidedly new tilt in attitudes towards the Western world as well. "The China Dream", proposed by President Xi Jinping when he took office in 2012, has a very American flavor that is designed to combine the Party, and the epitomes of nationalism, and connotations of sumptuousness.³⁰ A new video campaign released on *People's Daily* social-media accounts, which is the official representative of the Communist Party, advertises the claim to stand alongside the dreams of China's individuals. The video

³⁰ Murong Xuecun, "The New Face of Chinese Propaganda," trans. Stacy Mosher, *New York Times*, December 22, 2013, page SR5. New York edition.

advertises the Party's support for its "ancient and youthful country," which is "full of opportunities, along with untold challenges" with an English voiceover which is not clearly British or American.³¹ If the Party is opening up to Western ideology, it would be imperative to compare the American and Chinese Dream; the historical context of the Chinese Civil War and the Cult of Mao is crafting a Chinese Dream very different from the American Dream brought on by the California Gold Rush and other factors that drove up immigration from all parts of the world. More research could also be put into China after Mao and how attitudes towards propaganda itself have changed within the nation; propaganda is still alive and well in modern China and the Chinese Communist party has not forgotten it as the umbilical cord between the Party's ambition and the millions of Chinese men, women, artists, illiterate rural farmers, and average citizens that it impelled to bring the Party to power.

³¹ Hannah Beech, "This is What Communist Propaganda Looks Like These Days," *Time*, February 9, 2015, <http://time.com/3700602/chinese-communist-party-chinese-dream-propaganda-corporate-ad/>.

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