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Mao's Homeworld(s) – A comment on the use of propaganda posters in post-war China

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Abstract: Within cognitive science, narratives are regarded as crucial and fundamental cognitive instruments or tools. As Roger Schank suggests, the identity of (sub-)cultures is to a considerable extent based upon the sharing of narrative structures (Schank. 1995. *Tell me a story: Narrative and intelligence*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.). According to Schank, culturally shared stories, as do many other stories, occur frequently in highly abbreviated form, as “skeleton stories” or “gists.” Collective identities are conveyed in and between cultures not only through verbal discourse, but also by pictorial means. Many pictures and visual artworks have indeed been produced in order to establish and to consolidate a home-culture and to demarcate it from conceived extra-cultural counterparts.

Some of my previous work on these lines has been concerned with demarcation efforts in visual media of “Jews” as extra-cultural, since the Middle Ages onwards, in the Third Reich’s iconography, as well as in modern, radicalized forms of anti-Semitic picturing in Arab media (Ranta. 2016. The (pictorial) construction of collective identities in the Third Reich. *Language and Semiotic Studies* 2(3). 107–124, Ranta. 2017. Master narratives and the (pictorial) construction of otherness: Anti-semitic images in the Third Reich and beyond. *Contemporary Aesthetics* 15. <https://contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=765> (accessed 17 November 2019.). In building upon and extending this work, I shall focus in the current paper upon attempts of creating cultural and political cohesion by means of pictorial propaganda in post-war China from the early 1950’s onwards, as promoted by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) under the leadership by Mao Zedong. Some concrete pictorial examples indicating these attempts will be discussed from a narratological and cultural semiotic perspective.

Keywords: pictorial propaganda, narrativity, cultural semiotics, post-war China, Mao Zedong

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1 The Homeworld and its counterparts

In his philosophical analysis of experience and consciousness, the phenomenologist Husserl (1973; cf. Sonesson 2016) introduced and elucidated the concept of Lifeworld – the (dynamic) horizon and shared “ground” of all our experiences and the world taken for granted, i. e. the background on which all things appear as themselves and as meaningful. Even if an individual’s historicity is intimately tied up with his personal lifeworld, this doesn’t mean that the lifeworld is a purely individual phenomenon. Consciousness is regarded as rooted in and functioning in a world of meanings and pre-judgements that are socially, culturally, and historically constituted. Within the Lifeworld, in addition to any individual stance, intersubjective higher order groupings, such as families or nations, are established, joined by common purposes, practices, “communal memories,” and – we might add – shared stories. Such collective units may be said to exhibit characteristics resembling those of individual persons, though of a higher order with a “supra-personal consciousness” (cf. Lewis and Staehler 2010: 57). Through joint projects, purposes, and goals, a group thus becomes constituted as a group, with something like a supra-individual intentionality.

As Husserl elaborated his thoughts on intersubjectivity and historicity, he introduced the concepts of Homeworld and Alienworld, intended to designate historically dynamic and co-constitutive collective worlds (as experienced). The Homeworld might be described as a single community of subjects, their common lifeworld – a general framework which can be looked upon as a system of values or meanings, fixed by (implicit) intersubjective standards that determine what should count as “normal.” An Alienworld, on the other hand, is something considered abnormal to a perceived standard of normality, conceived as alien, which can only be appropriated or assimilated into the Lifeworld, and only understood against the latter’s background. Important in this context is also the role of language and narrativity. Language provides an extension of the individual’s horizon and is an essential means of creating myths and narratives, connecting the individual with ancestors and other group members, and thereby constituting and consolidating the Homeworld’s history and identity. Time and history are from this perspective experienced as narrative structures, with a beginning, middle or progress, and (open or closed) ending (Lewis and Staehler 2010: 62).

From a cultural semiotic viewpoint, e. g. as suggested by the Tartu school of semiotics, it might be argued that all societies make models of their own culture, conceived of as in opposition to other cultures (Lotman et al. 1975). In these models, the own culture is basically opposed to nature or non-culture, as order to disorder, civilisation to Barbarism, and so on. This conception might be

regarded as a canonical model, defined from the point of view of the own culture itself, implicitly placing the Ego inside it looking out over non-culture, which can only be comprehensible on the background of the Homeworld (as suggested by Sonesson 2000, Sonesson 2004, Sonesson 2012).

There are at least two kinds of criteria for making such a division between culture (or Ego) and non-culture (or Alius): something could be ascribed to a non-culture because it is less valued (a normative stance), or because it is too difficult or even impossible to understand (a cognitive stance). According to this model (see Figure 1), an Alius-culture is – from the Ego-perspective – characterized by the absence of communication and basically an unwillingness to be understood. So-called “non-texts” belonging to the Alius-culture are uninformative and lack any value; they are not regarded as having the potential of participating in a dialogical communicative act.¹ The relationship between Ego-culture and Alius is asymmetrical, dominated by the Ego, which decides which position to take versus the counterpart. Non-texts from the Alius-culture may be observed, but are not allowed to enter the Ego-culture sphere, being unwanted and/or perceived as unintelligible.

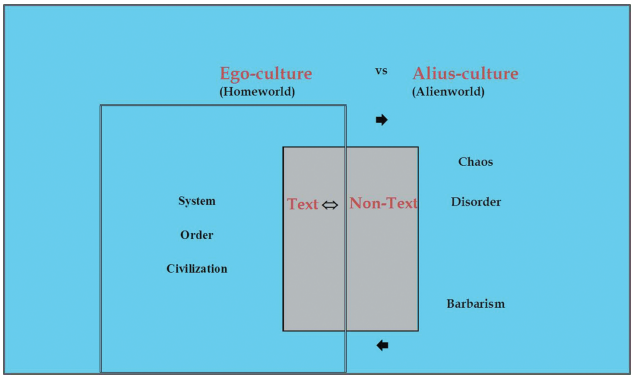


Figure 1: Canonical model of cultural semiotics. Modified illustration from Sonesson (2000: 539).

As one might argue, also pictures and, at least by implication, pictorial story-telling can have a contributing role to the establishment and consolidation of worldviews and Homeworlds in Husserl’s sense (cf. Ranta 2007, Ranta 2013).

¹ “Text” should here be understood in a wide semiotic sense, i. e. as every meaning-bearing artifact produced within a particular culture.

Many pictures and visual artworks have indeed been produced in order to create and to consolidate an Ego-culture and to demarcate it from conceived alien counterparts, not least by narrativizing and (re-)constructing their historical pasts and possible futures. My previous work on these lines has been concerned with demarcation efforts of “Jews” as extra-cultural since the Middle Ages onwards, in the Third Reich’s iconography, as well as in modern, radicalized forms of anti-Semitic picturing in Arab media. In the following, I shall extend this approach by considering the employment of pictorial propaganda in post-war China from the early 1950s onwards.

2 Socialist transformations in post-war China

The Chinese Civil War (1927–1950) between nationalist and communist fractions controlled by Chiang Kai-shek and Mao Zedong respectively, ended with the Communist Party having gained control over most parts of mainland China. In 1949, Mao officially declared the founding of The People’s Republic of China (PRC), and numerous basic political reforms were carried out. Extensive land reforms took place, where land ownership became radically overhauled in favour of the underprivileged class of peasants (whose support of the regime hereby increased). Attempts to minimize foreign investments and instead to promote an independent industrial system were made. The *Great Leap Forward*, a massive economic and social program led by Mao from 1958 to 1962, intended to change the Chinese nation from an agrarian economy to an advanced socialist society by means of rapid industrialization and agricultural collectivization. However, this endeavour resulted in an extreme economic recession, causing the death of tens of millions of people by starvation; others, accused of having a critical stance towards this policy, were persecuted as counter-revolutionaries and sometimes even tortured to death.

The failure of this program became already officially noticed and debated by the Communist Party of China (CPC) in 1959, which led to the subsequent marginalization of Mao within the party. Later on, in 1966, Mao and his allies initiated the Cultural Revolution, which lasted until his death in 1976, officially in order to purge the Chinese society from capitalist bourgeois (“revisionist”) elements. Practically, however, it helped Mao to regain and strengthen his previous position of political power and to restore Maoist thought. According to Mao, “revisionists” had infiltrated the government and society in general, attempting to reinstate capitalism. Young people and students were encouraged to become politically and actively engaged, forming so-called Red Guard groups, later on also involving

the military and urban workers, in order to purge society from bourgeois influences, quite frequently leading to violent struggles. Thus, also this mass movement had a significantly negative impact on the country, where millions of people were forcibly moved to rural regions and/or persecuted, including public humiliation, hard labour, imprisonment, and even torture and executions. Not surprisingly, this extreme focus on “revolutionary,” anti-capitalist activities had devastating consequences for the economic development of the country. Furthermore, numerous cultural and historical sites and artworks, regarded as bourgeois and anti-socialist, were vandalized and destroyed, while at the same time Mao's personal cult, not least in pictorial media, took immense proportions.

After Mao's death in 1976, reformers within the CPC, most notably Deng Xiaoping – whose own economic views had been at odds with Mao's – initiated significant political reforms, which successively permitted an open-market economy and private land leases. Successively, living standards increased, especially in urban areas, and, moreover, the hitherto strict governmental control over people's personal lives loosened. In 1981, the CPC actually went so far as to admit that the Cultural Revolution was “responsible for the most severe setback and the heaviest losses suffered by the Party, the state, and the people since the founding of the People's Republic [...] The history of the ‘cultural revolution’ has proved that Comrade Mao Zedong's principal theses for initiating this revolution conformed neither to Marxism, Leninism, nor to Chinese reality. They represent an entirely erroneous appraisal of the prevailing class relations and political situation in the Party and state.”² In this short historical outline of post-war China's political history, several intricacies and details have been omitted, a discussion of which, however, would fall outside the scope of this paper (for detailed accounts, see e. g. Schoenhals 1996; Macfarquhar and Schoenhals 2006). Still, as this overview reveals, the establishment and consolidation of the PRC was characterized by considerable political, economic, and social turmoil, by violent conflicts and struggles, and by painful attempts to create cultural-political cohesion and ideological stringency.

3 Propaganda posters: Searching for a program

Before the communist revolution, art in dynastic China was often produced for religious or funerary purposes, as architectural ornaments, or within a Confucian

² <https://www.marxists.org/subject/china/documents/cpc/history/01.htm> (accessed November 19, 2019).

scholarly tradition, especially ink painting and calligraphy. The use of pictures for conveying political, religious, or otherwise ideological messages, with the purpose of altering peoples' attitudes or behaviour, has of course been widespread throughout history, in China as elsewhere. But in post-war China, an extensive production and distribution of propagandistic posters emerged, as an important means for creating political and cultural cohesion among a largely illiterate population, or – to put it in other words – to establish a new revolutionary Homeworld. By these means, then, the generation of public pictorial “texts” was supposed to create a new sense of cultural belonging and historical continuity.

Although socialist realism was recommended as the official style, and many Chinese artists were sent to the USSR for artistic training, this style was not mandatory; at least in the 1950s and early 1960, there was still a relatively high degree of artistic freedom (Landsberger 1999: 26). Admittedly, the subject-matters tended to be adapted in order to support the new political regime, the leader Mao himself, and the progressing industrialization (Chiu and Shengtian 2008: 5). Still, the years 1956–1966 were characterized by uncertainty among intellectuals and artists as to their social responsibilities, and the authorities vacillated between liberal and more controlling cultural policies (Galikowski 1998: 55–136). Generally, the political atmosphere during the Great Leap Forward was also characterized by optimism, enthusiasm, and the belief that China in a near future could radically advance economically, and with the promise of a morally superior, socialist utopia within reach. And art was also allowed to display elements of romanticism, or, as Mao himself put it, a “fusion of revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism” rather than a straight Soviet socialist realism (which became reserved for oil painting rather than mass-produced art; Landsberger 1995: 38, Landsberger 1999: 27). Art should show glamorous and embellished views of the motherland, the strength and heroism of the people, and the wisdom of the political leaders. Propagandistic art should become more inherently Chinese, stressing romantic imagination and even human subjectivity, instead of a draconian realism (Galikowski 1998: 87–95, 100–104; Landsberger 1999: 27).

Popular art forms during this period consisted partly of propagandistic murals, indoors as well as outdoors, and so-called New Year pictures (*nian hua*; Landsberger 1999: 24). The latter ones, especially appreciated on the countryside, had traditionally been woodblock prints, with colourful, decorative elements from folk art, expressing wishes for success and happiness. Often they displayed scenes of abundance and luxury home interiors, while at the same time also hinting at Confucian virtues (which permeated society at large). During the 1940s, this traditional art form was mass-produced by the CPC, but now focusing on political themes intended to phase out “feudal” Confucian superstition, and displaying the lives of (ideal model) workers, peasants, and soldiers, as well as the “leader’s



Figure 2: (Left) Lin Gang: “Zhao Guilan at the heroes’ reception” (1950; reproduction granted by IISH/Stefan R. Landsberger/ Private Collection; illustration from <https://chineseposters.net/posters/e15-555.php> [accessed November 16, 2019]).

portrait.” A successful and admired adaptation of the New Year’s picture genre was the painting “Zhao Guilan at the Heroes’ Reception” from 1950 (Figure 2), depicting Mao and other political leaders at the National Conference of Worker-Peasant-Soldier Model Representatives. In the centre of this composition, we can see Mao with Zhao Guilan, being praised for her virtuous deeds; the general atmosphere is characterized by warmth and benevolence (Chiu and Shengtian 2008: 92).

However, from the mid-1950s onwards, the demand among potential buyers, especially peasants with a resistant traditional taste, of those politically adapted New Year pictures decreased, resulting in the return of classical themes, such as Chinese opera characters, chubby babies (symbolizing offspring and abundance), and mascots (e. g. tigers, lions etc.). Although cultural authorities, for example in the Shandong province, encouraged the rendering of political subjects, at times of political relaxation artists also stuck to established forms and themes, as in the picture “Go all out and aim high. The East leaps forward, the West is worried” from 1958 (Figure 3; Galikowski 1998: 93–97).

To some extent, then, there was some kind of intellectual and artistic freedom during these “Vacillating Years,” i. e. 1956–1966 (chapter title from Galikowski 1998: 55–136).

After this period, however, the cultural atmosphere became harsher and changed quite dramatically. Senior party officials became gradually replaced by cadres more supportive of Mao’s leadership and thoughts. A particular important



Figure 3: (Right) Zhang Ruji, Wang Shuhui and Shao Guohuan: “Go all out and aim high. The East leaps forward, the West is worried.” (1958; reproduction granted by IISH/Stefan R. Landsberger/ Private Collection; illustration from <https://chineseposters.net/posters/e16-33.php> [accessed November 16, 2019]).

position was given to his fourth wife, Jian Qing, a former actress, who in 1966 became member of the Central Cultural Revolution Group (CCRG) and in practice, although not nominally, its leader (Cohen 1987: 21; Landsberger 1995: 40). From within the CCRG, which became the guiding force for the new cultural policy, she managed to take control over not only the performing, but also the visual arts. Art, in her view, should have even more emphasized revolutionary qualities and depict positive, heroic characters, being at the centre of the staged actions. Traditional artists, which hitherto still had been to some extent esteemed, became now targets for severe criticism and denounced as bourgeois; sometimes their works were even destroyed by Red Guards raiding their homes and studios. As counter-examples of what good art should be like, their works were sometimes also shown in so-called “black painting” exhibitions, somewhat similar in intent to the “degenerate art” exhibits in Nazi Germany in the late 1930s (cf. Galikowski 1998: 158–163; Chiu and Shengtian 2008: 7).

From then on, propaganda posters became some of the most important channels for transmitting the party ideology and particularly Mao’s thoughts. Socialist realism, as already launched through and by the Soviet Union, had declined in popularity at the end of the 1950s, but was again encouraged and promoted as exemplary art. Soviet Socialist realism had its stylistic roots in realistic and socially critical works by painters such as Ilya Repin, which in turn was influenced by Western academic or Grand Manner style derived from

neoclassicism (Galikowski 1998: 38–39; Cohen 1987: 18). Socialist Realist images, however, had had an outspoken political, communist agenda, which now, having been exported by the Soviet Union, became adapted to specific Chinese purposes as envisaged by Jian Qing and the CCRG, and hence functioned as important cognitive-cultural tools for establishing the new Chinese Homeworld.

4 General Characteristics of Chinese Propaganda Posters

Stylistically, socialist realism in the visual arts seemed to strive for some kind of visual truthfulness, clarity, and ease of recognisability. Human figures should be rendered in detail, modelled carefully in light and shade, with clear contours, appearing and acting in illusionistic spaces. Usually, the main subject(s) occur(s) in the centre of the image, often highlighted by focused sources of light, and being vividly coloured. Concepts of truth or visual accuracy, however, were not supposed to be employed in a literal sense – rather, these images should portray an aspired future in the present; not “life as it really is,” but “life as it ought to be” (cf. Landsberger 1999: 26). In this respect, socialist realism was teleologically-oriented, pointing to an ideal communist future.

On the content side, then, art should aim at glorified depictions of communist values and states of affairs, such as the emancipation of the proletariat, by means of this “realistic” imagery. Especially in China, posters were used as effective vehicles for propagating these values and providing examples of correct behaviour, not least among illiterates. In quantitative terms, the climax of poster production of wood block prints, gouaches, oil paintings, etc. occurred during the Great Leap Forward and not least the Cultural Revolution. As this kind of prints could be easily mass-produced at low costs, they became widespread, penetrating all social levels and environments, such as offices, factories, private houses, dormitories, and so on. We may sum up some of its general stylistic characteristics as follows:

- figurative, naturalistic, easily comprehensible imagery;
- often strong, bold colours, clear outlines of figures, especially in woodcuts (often reduced to the colour scheme red-white-black);
- optimistic, agreeable, positive mood;
- happy model citizens, such as peasants, youngsters, soldiers, workers in factories and collective farms taking up dynamic, energetic poses, and displaying strong, healthy bodies;

- diminished gender distinctions; stereotypical, “masculinized” bodies; baggy, sexless clothes;
- inclusion of politically inspired, sometimes militaristic, verbal slogans/captions;
- promoting utilitarian, communist goals; glorifying work and personal sacrifice for the greater well-being (Landsberger 1999: 29–30).

These propagandistic images were also intended as instructive, abbreviated narratives, telling politically and/or morally endorsed stories of model citizens like Zhao Guilan (Figure 2) and not least Mao himself.³ According to Mao, and later practically enforced by Jian Qing, pictorial representations of such models of ideal behaviour could influence beholder’s conduct and thinking; an idea which of course Chinese, as well as also Western philosophers throughout history, since at least Plato and Confucius, had postulated. So these models could be workers, peasants, party officials, and not least soldiers, but the super model as such was Mao himself. Already before the Cultural Revolution, going back as far as the 1940s, Mao had been frequently depicted in propaganda art and posters. However, from the 1960s onwards, the mass production of Mao images – as Great Teacher, Leader, Commander, Nation’s Father, and so on – was unprecedented. Pictures of him occurred in all private or public social contexts, on posters (with varying slogans, depending on the purpose), newspaper and journal covers, etc. (Landsberger 1999: 30–31). Thus the writings, esp. his so-called “Little Red Book,” and god-like portraits of Mao became cohesive ideological instruments, permeating all aspects of society (cf. Cook 2014).

Propaganda posters, apart from rendering role models and their activities, also focused on other topics, such as military or revolutionary successes. Including, but not limited to the latter, also historic themes became popular, not least as efforts to recreate or revise history. Thus formerly esteemed party functionaries, who had fallen out of favour, were deleted from paintings and replaced with more appropriate figures. And historical events became distorted for the current political purposes at hand. One especially famous painting, just to mention one example, was “Chairman Mao goes to Anyuan” (Figure 4), which referred to the Anyuan miners’ strike of 1922, a decisive moment for the Chinese revolution (Landsberger 1999; Chiu and Shengtian 2008: 11, 13, 95–97). Here Mao is depicted as almost supernatural and powerful, dressed in a traditional long tunic and overtopping a huge mountain landscape in the background. As to the actual historical background, one may note that the influential revolutionary and politician Liu Shaoqi

³ Cf. Galikowski (1998: 164–166) on model operas, as envisaged by Jian Qing which, however, also set the standards for all the other arts.



Figure 4: (Left) Liu Chunhua: “Chairman Mao goes to Anyuan” (1967; reproduction granted by IISH/ Stefan R. Landsberger/ Private Collection; illustration from <https://chineseposters.net/themes/mao-anyuan.php> [accessed November 16, 2019]).

had been the key figure during the strike in question, not Mao himself. Liu, however, as a rival of Mao, fell into disgrace and was purged in 1966; subsequently he died in prison in 1969 (Landsberger and van der Heijden 2009: 13). The purpose of this historically misleading painting, then, was to re-establish and enforce Mao’s role as the supreme leader. It has been estimated that about nine hundred million copies of this painting were distributed as posters, reproduced in newspapers, and displayed at mass meetings (cf. Galikowski 1998: 149–152; Landsberger 1999: 29–30). The divine and supernatural, all-encompassing character of Mao became not least apparent in innumerable portraits of him as inserted into the centre of a sun, giving him almost some kind of halo (Figure 5; Chiu and Shengtian 2008: 96–99).

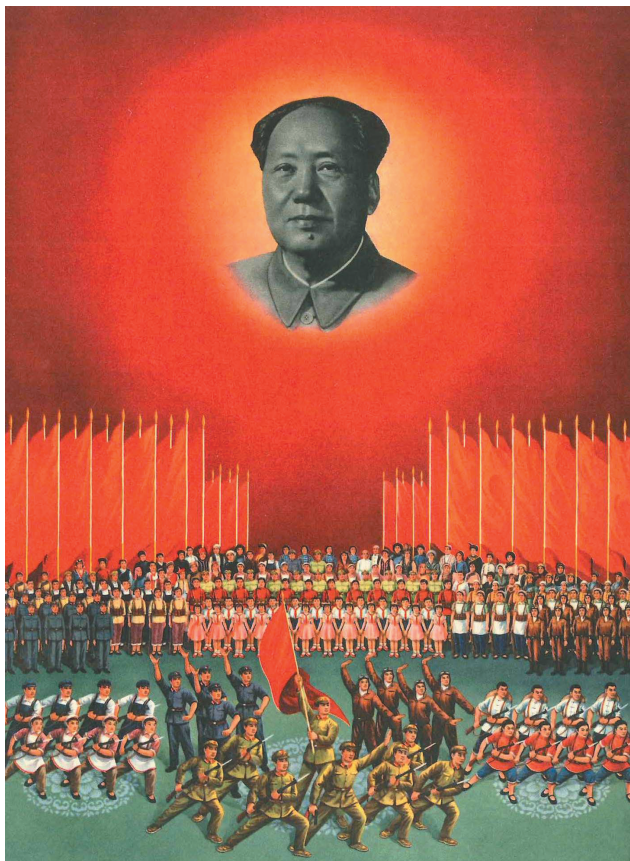


Figure 5: (Right) Zhang Yuqing: “The East is red” (1965; reproduction granted by IISH/Stefan R. Landsberger/ Private Collection; illustration from <https://chineseposters.net/gallery/e12-606.php> [accessed December 24, 2019]).

In the early 1970s, the mass production of Mao images decreased and was sometimes substituted by other heroic party and People’s Liberation Army figures (e. g. Chen Yonggui and Lei Feng), but, more importantly, emphasis was put on the supposed results of Mao’s political endeavours. Thus propagandistic imagery now tended to show industrial settings and agrarian utopias. Although examples of successful industrial production were displayed, it was especially the joyful and productively efficient country life, with an abundance of crops that was frequently uplifted (Figures 6 and 7). Interestingly, often the productive role of women was emphasized, showing them as efficient workers, as countryside “barefoot”-doctors, etc. (Landsberger 1999: 31–32; Liu 2012: 66–75, 76–84).

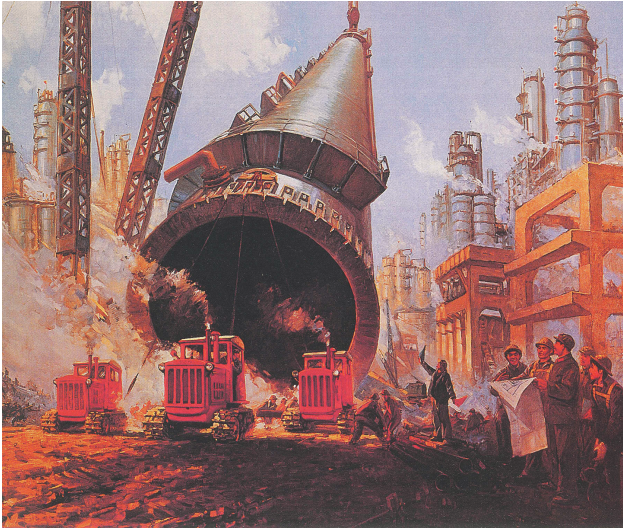
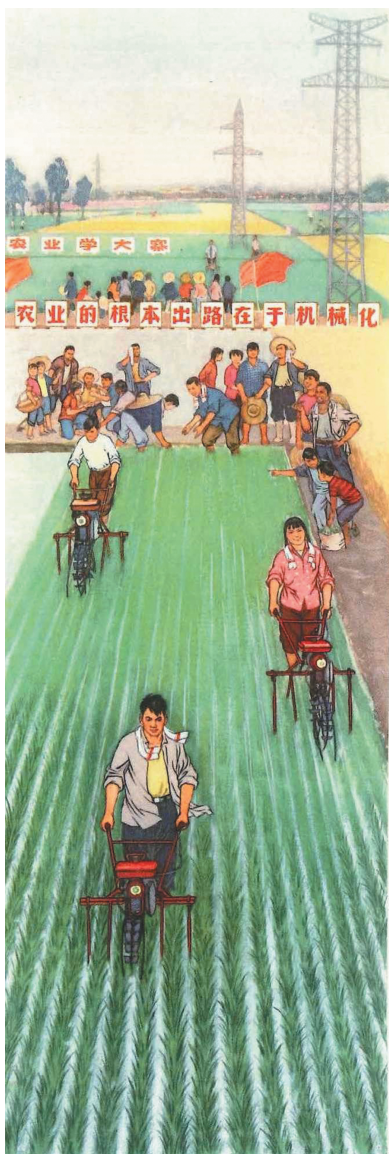


Figure 6: (Left) Nanjing Municipal Art Creation Study Group: “Becoming more prosperous every day” (early 1970s; reproduction granted by IISH/Stefan R. Landsberger/ Private Collection; illustration from <https://chineseposters.net/posters/e13-43.php> [accessed November 16, 2019]).

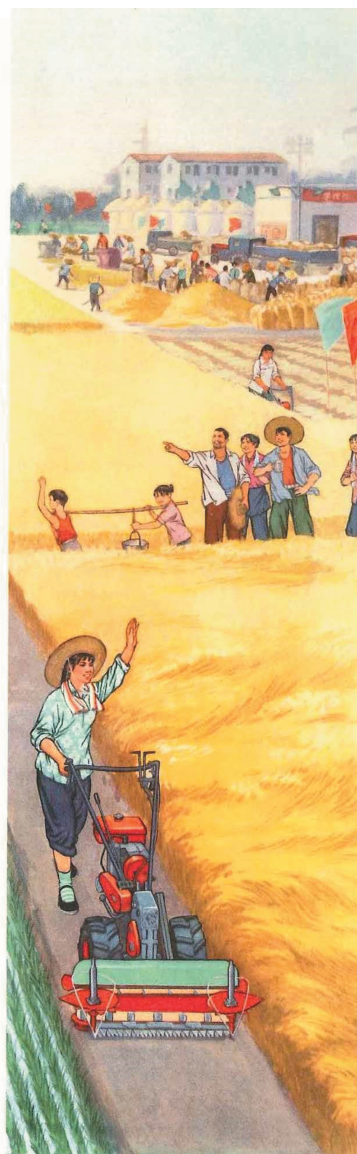
Social cohesion and harmony were commonly promoted goals to strive for. Apart from industrial and agricultural successes resulting from joint efforts and communist ideals, the positive value of cooperation and group loyalty was also emphasized in images of military enterprises and the defence of the Homeland as well as general idealizations of everyday social life within the working brigades, schools, families, etc. (Figures 8 and 9).

In these propagandistic images, not all of them, however, showed model citizens or “sanctioned” party officials. As already mentioned, political antagonists or discarded party officials were sometimes simply erased from, or replaced in, propagandistic art. Moreover, antagonists were also more explicitly attacked. These assaults frequently occurred in so-called “big-character posters,” i. e. wall-mounted posters using large-sized Chinese characters, but also in pictorial form (Landsberger 1999: 28). Thus we can find posters where “anti-social elements” in general, or domestic as well as foreign forces threatening social order, are represented, such as the USA with its “imperialist” endeavors (see Figures 10 and 11). Quite typical propaganda posters during the Cultural Revolution were made from woodcuts with a reduced black, white, and red colour scheme and strong contours, signifying revolutionary strength and purity (cf. Landsberger and van der Heijden 2009: 14). Here we can also find depictions of anti-



四不弯腰屏

(三)



四不弯腰屏

(四)

Figure 7: (Right) Nanhui District Spare Time Art Group: “Four scrolls about not having to bend down [3, 4]” (1976; reproduction granted by IISH/Stefan R. Landsberger/ Private Collection; illustration from <https://chineseposters.net/posters/e15-104.php> [accessed November 16, 2019]).



Figure 8: (Left) Guan Qiming: “Heighten our vigilance, defend the motherland! Be ready at all times to destroy the enemy intruders!” (1970; reproduction granted by IISH/Stefan R. Landsberger/ Private Collection; illustration from <https://chineseposters.net/posters/g1-247.php> [accessed November 16, 2019]).).

characters, i. e. political opponents to Mao and his current followers, such as Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping mentioned earlier, sometimes depicted in minimal size, as literally and figuratively insignificant compared to the grandeur and combative strength of revolutionary fighters (see Figures 12 and 13; see also Figure 3).

However, anti-models seem to have played a less important role than positive ones, which personified presumed or aspired societal-economic achievements. The actual and future Homeworld is largely a happy one, where impairing elements are often ignored; instead, the bright sides become strongly



Figure 9: (Right) Zhao Kunhan: “The production brigade’s reading room” (1975; reproduction granted by IISH/Stefan R. Landsberger/ Private Collection; illustration from <https://chinese-posters.net/posters/e12-124.php> [accessed November 16, 2019]).

accentuated and uplifted. Thus the positive demarcation of the new Chinese Ego-culture by pictorial means occurs rather by treating its “barbaric” counterpart with silence. Systematic and extensive pictorial renderings of cultural-political antagonists are thus less recurrent than those of e. g. the Jews in the Third Reich.

As to the ethnic heterogeneity of China, where, in addition to the dominant Han majority, 55 officially acknowledged ethnic groups exist, the superiority of the Han people is usually emphasized in the propaganda pictures. Posters made during the first three decades of the PRC’s reign show happy minorities having prospered from the socialist revolution under the guidance of the Han, exemplified by the former treated by Han nurses in modern hospitals. Moreover, attempts were commonly made to visualize the successful integration of minorities, as being part of a larger harmonious Chinese socialist family, as when e. g. Mongolian children, thanks to the Han, have got access to modern equipment such as transistor radios (see Figures 14 and 15; cf. Landsberger 1995: 163–166). Despite the somewhat derogatory implications in these posters, the production of which diminished in the 1980s, minorities



Figure 10: (Left) Designer unknown: “He who harms the people will not easily escape justice!” (c. 1950; reproduction granted by IISH/Stefan R. Landsberger/ Private Collection; illustration from <https://chineseposters.net/posters/pc-195a-013.php> [accessed November 16, 2019]).

were hardly presented as some kind of cultural counterparts, or members of something like “Alienworlds” – instead, the internal harmony of the Chinese society was continuously stressed.

In summarizing this section, then, we may discern the following thematic subjects (several of which also being intermixed) in Chinese propaganda posters during the 1950s–70s (cf. Landsberger 1995, Landsberger 1999; Chiu and Shengtian 2008; Liu 2012):

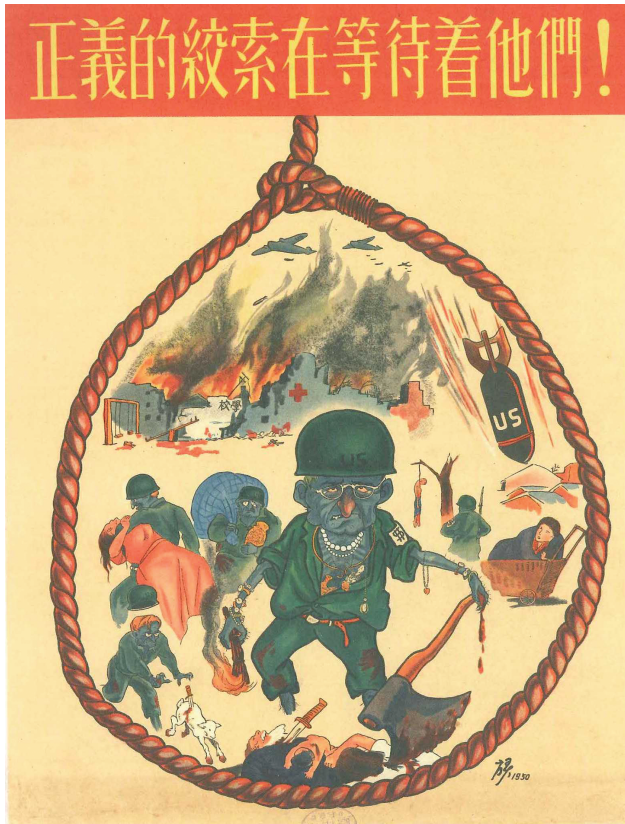


Figure 11: (Right) Fang Ling: “The justified noose awaits them” (1951; reproduction granted by IISH/Stefan R. Landsberger/ Private Collection; illustration from <https://chinese posters.net/posters/pc-1950-001.php> [accessed November 16, 2019]).

- (The deification of) Mao (Figures 4 and 5)
- The communist party (Figures 2 and 5)
- Model citizens (Figures 2, 6–9)
- Successful industrial production (Figure 6)
- An agrarian utopia (Figure 7)
- (Pseudo-)historicism (Figure 4)
- Military motifs (Figure 8)
- Social life: working brigades, school, the happy family, etc. (Figures 9 and 14–15)
- Enemies/opponents of the PRC/CPC (Figures 3 and 10–13)
- Ethnical minorities as integrated part of China (Figures 14 and 15).



Figure 12: (Left) Designer unknown: “Completely smash the capitalist class and the reactionary life of Liu and Deng!” (c. 1967; reproduction granted by IISH/Stefan R. Landsberger/ Private Collection; illustration from <https://chinese posters.net/posters/e16-338.php> [accessed November 16, 2019]).

5 Concluding remarks: The formation of an “Us”

The abundant production of propaganda posters during the first decades of the PRC had been promoted as an instrumentally important means for creating and consolidating cultural and political cohesion and stability. This role, however, diminished successively after Mao’s death and most notably in the 1980s and 90s under the rule of Deng Xiaoping (1904–1997), who has been credited for his extensive market-economic reforms and an opening to the global economy, leading to a generally increased standard of living. Posters were now designed to create public support of these economic reforms and also the opening to the West, while at the same time upholding the political orthodoxy and the leading role of the Party.

Thematically, they became less heroic, strident, and militant, now rather suggesting more cultured, hygienic, and educated lifestyles. Explicit political contents were replaced by glimpses of living the good life in a world of material consumption, rather than merely producing things. People were shown with a greater diversity in their clothing and hair styles, having opportunities for e.g. travelling and owning luxury items, and gender differences were reintroduced. In general, people seemed to have more private fun (see Figures 16 and 17; cf.



Figure 14: (Left) Zhou Ruizhuang: “Fraternal love as in one family” (1980; reproduction granted by IISH/ Stefan R. Landsberger/ Private Collection; illustration from <https://chineseposters.net/posters/e13-304.php> [accessed November 16, 2019]).

than (explicitly) pointing to an Alienworld. Enemies occur and are depicted as disagreeable or deformed creatures (cf. Figures 10 and 11) and even as vermin-like (cf. Figures 12 and 13). But these anti-models seemed to play a far lesser role in propagandistic art compared to, for example, the outspoken, widespread, and visually more coherent anti-Semitic iconography flourishing in the Third Reich and nowadays in Arab countries.⁴ Chinese propaganda art was not racist, yet sometimes biased to uplift the superiority of Han people. Ethnic minorities, though, did not exist in clear opposition to the Chinese Homeworld, but were rather presumed to having become assimilated. Nevertheless, this notwithstanding, anti-models (such as nationalist groups, revisionists, capitalists, and imperialist foreign forces) – i. e. alien agents which propaganda art at least hinted at or presupposed as common knowledge – did certainly exist in public consciousness, established through verbal discourse and narratives or concrete acts of political-social demarcation and various penalties.

⁴ Since the end of nineteenth century, as e. g. in French anti-Semitic cartoons and illustrations, Jews were regularly depicted with distinctive physiognomic features, as swarthy, with curly black hair, large hook-noses, thick lips, beady-eyed, large feet, crooked postures, and so on. (Cf. Ranta 2016, 2017).



Figure 15: (Right) Wang Zhiping, Guo Chongguang. “The grasslands are connected with Beijing” (1977; reproduction granted by IISH/ Stefan R. Landsberger/ Private Collection; illustration from <https://chinese posters.net/posters/e13-334.php> [accessed November 16, 2019]).

As cognitive scientists, such as Jerome Bruner and Roger Schank have argued, narratives are vital cognitive instruments or tools (Bruner 1990; Schank 1995). Moreover, according to Schank, also the identity of (sub-)cultures is crucially dependent on the sharing of narrative structures. Culturally shared and circulated stories – as stories in general – are frequently manifested in highly abbreviated form, as “skeleton stories” or “gists.” People often do not memorize specific and detailed narrative instantiations of stories, but rather gists. Thus, concise utterances can evoke possible gists, which may be extended and mentally transformed into more or less complete narratives. We might reasonably assume that this applies also to pictorial material, which can function in similar ways, i. e. as narrative abbreviations or reminders. Pictures may certainly have a quite explicit narrative appearance, as in serial picturing, but sometimes even highly condensed depictions of single events or persons may generate temporally extended narrative reconstructions. Thus, in ways that correspond to Schank’s account of storytelling and cognition in general, pictorial means, such as the propaganda posters discussed in this article, may also have implications for conceptions of one’s Homeworld in relation to an Alienworld. Many pictures and visual artworks have indeed been produced in order to establish,



Figure 16: (Left) Peng Ming: “The age of smiling” (1988; reproduction granted by IISH/ Stefan R. Landsberger/ Private Collection; illustration from <https://chinese posters.net/posters/e13-437.php> [accessed November 16, 2019]).

modify, and demarcate certain cultural identities (Schank 1995; cf. also Ranta 2013, Ranta 2016, Ranta 2017). And these intentions certainly seem to have played a significant role for the creation of post-war China’s identity, by employing pictorial gists for historical (re-)constructions, for stories about an ideal present, and for narratives about a utopian future.

The decline of poster production mentioned above, which increasingly became regarded as old-fashioned, can also be explained by the growing importance which electronic and digital media would gain in the decades to follow (for further reading, see for example Lee 2000; Keane 2007; Louie 2008;



Figure 17: (Right) Liu Yuanxing: “The people are industrious; spring is early” (1987; reproduction granted by IISH/ Stefan R. Landsberger/ Private Collection; illustration from <https://chineseposters.net/gallery/e15-518.php> [accessed November 16, 2019]).

Zhong 2010; Shirk 2011; Cai 2016). Although even nowadays billboards with political and morally instructive slogans and pictures can be seen in Chinese streets, other media, such as television and not least the internet, have become far more influential and dominant means for enhancing cultural stability and political control in contemporary China – or, put another way, to create, consolidate, and demarcate a Chinese “Us.”⁵

⁵ I would like to thank Michael Schoenhals for his valuable comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

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