

CHAPTER 6

Red Culture

6.1 Recipes for Reform: Smashing the Gang of Four in the Dining Carriage Under Chairman Hua Guofeng

Jon Howlett

Most historians of the PRC are avid collectors of curios: items that capture the spirit of certain historical moments in modern China's ever-changing political climate. In this blog, I use a recipe book for train staff published in 1978 by the passenger department of the Guangzhou Railway Bureau, titled *Menus and Resources for Western Cuisine*, as an entryway to explore the history of the short-lived Hua Guofeng era (1976–1978) on its own terms.

Politics pervaded every public and private space in late 1970s China. Between 1966 and 1976, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution had plunged the country into tumult. Militant Red Guards had competed to show their dedication to Chairman Mao Zedong through the violent persecution of 'class enemies,' resulting in widespread death and destruction. For hundreds of millions of people, everyday life was defined by political rituals mandated by the state-sanctioned Mao cult (Leese 2011).

Mao died in September 1976, and the Cultural Revolution was concluded soon afterwards by his successor, Hua Guofeng. The elevation of the 'wise leader' Chairman Hua, as he was called in state propaganda, surprised contemporaries. The characteristically mercurial Mao had 'chosen not to chose' between the leaders of the left and right factions that had been locked in bitter

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Figure 6.1a: *Menus and Resources for Western Cuisine (Part One)* (note: the book has a different title on the outer cover).



Figure 6.1b: Jiang Nanchun 江南春 1976. ‘Chairman Mao trusted Chairman Hua completely; the people and army warmly endorse him too.’ Source: China Visual Arts Project, University of Westminster.

struggle over the previous decade. On taking power, Hua quickly ordered the arrest of the leftist ‘Gang of Four’, led by Mao’s wife, Jiang Qing. However, his rule was short-lived, and in December 1978 he was outmanoeuvred by Deng Xiaoping’s reformist faction. Deng became the paramount leader, while Hua was marginalised, retaining some official titles but little influence.

The period of Hua’s rule, from October 1976 to December 1978, has received little concerted attention from historians. In most historical surveys, this period is portrayed as a brief interregnum, warranting a paragraph or two at best as authors trace the origins of China’s four decades-long process of ‘reform and opening up’. The CCP’s 1981 ‘Resolution on certain questions in the history of



Figure 6.1c: Liu Nansheng 1978 刘南生. ‘Wholehearted support of the wise leader Chairman Hua.’ Source: China Visual Arts Project, University of Westminster.

our party' praised his contribution to the purge of the 'counterrevolutionary Jiang Qing clique'. However, it was savagely critical of Hua's 'two-whatever's' policy (to uphold whatever policy decisions Chairman Mao made, and whatever instructions he gave). In the most recently promulgated resolution on party history (2021), Hua's name is omitted entirely, rendering him an historical irrelevance.

Yet people living through the Hua era will have had little sense of what was to come. For many, the future looked as uncertain as the previous decade had felt. How can we, as historians, begin to approach the Hua era on its own terms? Exploring the material culture of this short-lived historical moment may provide some answers. In the 'new' history of the PRC that has emerged over the last decade, historians have placed great emphasis on the importance of



Figure 6.1d: Ha Qiongwen 哈琼文 1978. 'Call to battle, glorious role model.'
Source: China Visual Arts Project, University of Westminster.

everyday objects, as a corrective to approaches fixated on elite politics (Brown and Johnson 2015). In the hands of ‘Sinological garbologists,’ throwaway objects can allow us to understand how people navigated the everyday as the political climate changed around them.

In this context, the 330-page *Menus and Resources* reflects two political projects from the Hua era that were aborted not long after its publication. The first is visible in the very words used to print the collection: in December 1977, the PRC embarked on a radical programme of Chinese character simplification to promote literacy. The scheme proved hugely unpopular and was stalled in 1978 before being formally abandoned in 1986. Some characters in *Menus and Resources* follow this second round of character simplification (the first took place in the 1950s). For example, the word egg (*dan*) is written as 旦 and not 蛋, and Gang (*bang*) from ‘Gang of Four’ is written as 邦 rather than 帮. However, the new scheme was only partially implemented in this book, with most characters remaining unchanged.

The second abandoned project was Hua’s programme of economic reforms. From 1977, Hua’s government began to promote the ‘Four Modernisations’ (of agriculture, industry, defence, and science and technology), drawing on an idea first espoused by Zhou Enlai in the early 1960s. Importantly, however, where



Figure 6.1c: Table arrangement for three people.

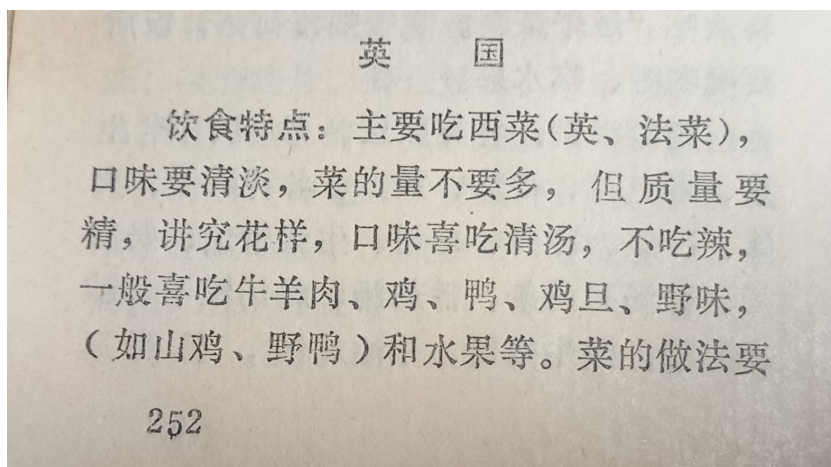


Figure 6.1f: Section on hosting British guests.

Hua had envisioned the ‘Four Modernisations’ as a state-led project using central planning, Deng and his successors unleashed the power of the market to transform the economy under the same slogan (Teiwes and Sun 2011). Nevertheless, the guide was meticulously compiled, and its publication represented a significant undertaking. The failure of Hua’s reform project and language reform were not foreseen when the book was produced.

The book itself is divided into two main parts, the first of which contains recipes and cooking techniques for a wide range of Western and Chinese dishes. The second half details the culinary preferences and eating habits of foreigners of sixty different nationalities from every inhabited continent. The section on hosting Britons, to give one example, recommends serving well-presented and high-quality food, while avoiding strong flavours. It notes that British guests expected to be woken with a cup of tea in bed and that some would ask for afternoon tea (genteel eating habits more suggestive of English tastes in the 1930s than the 1970s). The guide also contains instructions for waiting staff on the manners foreigners expected, as well as illustrations for table layouts.

The care that went into the guide’s production demonstrates the importance attached to providing proper hosting, typical of the careful management of foreigners in the PRC (Brady 2003). The foreword to the collection makes it clear that the dining carriage was expected to be a political space. Despite the Cultural Revolution having ended two years previously, politics continued to influence every aspect of life in China in the late 1970s, even when it came to preparing and serving food to foreign train passengers. As China embarked on the ‘Four Modernisations’, the number of foreign visitors was expected to increase. Accordingly, onboard catering staff were enjoined to perfect their cooking and hospitality to win glory for the socialist motherland under the wise leader Chairman Hua, and victory in the struggle against the poisonous ideology of the ‘Gang of Four’.

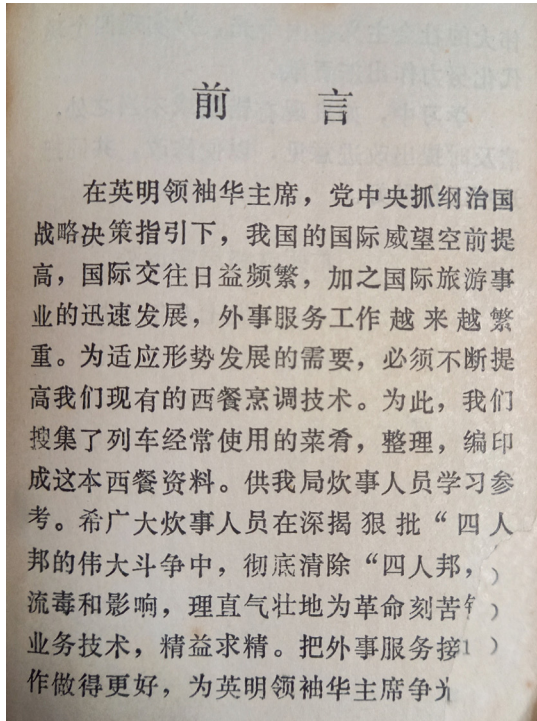


Figure 6.1g: Foreword.

The carefully-produced *Menus and Resources* speaks to the importance the Chinese state under Hua placed on post-Cultural Revolution ‘opening up’ in the name of modernisation. Perfecting the hosting of foreigners was important in late 1970s China. Hua’s ‘Four Modernisations’ project was abandoned but, as *Menus and Resources* shows, the Hua era was experienced by those who lived through it as the start of something new and not just an interregnum.

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6.2 The Art of the Propagandist: Visual Approaches to Understanding Revolutionary China

Steven F. Jackson

Happy. Angry. Inspired. Grateful. The emotions expressed in Chinese propaganda posters between 1949 and 1990 were not subtle or complex, nor for all of the embrace of 'socialist realism' in communist art were they realistic. These posters, with their vivid reds, yellows, oranges, blues, and greens were not Chinese people as they *were*; they were the Chinese people as they *ought to be*, at least according to the Communist Party. The fascination is that this proscriptive line in posters shifted frequently over the first four decades of the PRC, and these artefacts can give us insight into this period for teaching, learning, and research.

Founded in 1977 by writer and journalist John Gittings when he worked in the Chinese section of the Polytechnic of Central London (PCL), the China Visual Arts Project (CVAP) at the University of Westminster has digitised and made available an impressive collection of over 800 of these posters on the university archive site. The site is searchable and categorised based on Gittings' original 17 thematic categories. The collection is an invaluable tool for teaching about modern Chinese history and politics, as well as about the political role of visual arts in societies.

In this article, I describe three core ideas that emerge across the collection and reflect on their pedagogical value in the classroom.

1. Transforming society: revolutionary governments seek to change the societies they govern, to make a break from the past and to create new, ideal citizens. Social relations, such as gender and age are challenged. A good example of this can be seen in the quiet confidence of the face of the woman dressing a stone in Figure 6.2a.

2. Transforming nature: another aspect of communist societies (and indeed many societies prior to the 1970s) was the relationship of people to nature. In contrast to the near-universal concerns for the environment in the 21st century, Chinese posters showed a frequent theme of transforming nature for humanity's benefit. The second title of the 'Women hold up half the sky' post is 'Surely the face of nature can be transformed.' The next poster – 'The bank of the Yangzi river' (Figure 6.2b) – is particularly interesting because it uses



Figure 6.2a: Wang Dawei 王大为. 1975. 'Women can hold up half the sky; surely the face of nature can be transformed,' by Wang Dawei Source: China Visual Arts Project, University of Westminster.

a traditional *shanshui* 山水 ink wash painting technique for a familiar theme – the Yangtze River – but the banks of the river are now crowded with petrochemical facilities, an old-fashioned medium for a modern message: the river and its banks are being used for industry.

3. Recalling the Revolution: Fifteen years after the 1949 revolution, Chairman Mao Zedong realised that a new generation was growing up that had no memory of pre-revolutionary China or the conditions that gave rise to the Communist Party. The poster 'Don't forget class struggle, forever make revolutionary people' (Figure 6.2c) was part of a party effort to remind the new generation of that legacy. The central figure, a peasant man speaking earnestly to the fresh-faced youth uses posters to show what had happened. Thus, the image is about revolution, but also depicts posters and their use.

Chairman Mao, however, wanted more than posters to create a new revolutionary generation; he wanted the youth of China to take action against what he regarded as the parts of China's leadership who were 'revising' communism



Figure 6.2b: Song, Wenzhi 宋文治. 1973. ‘The bank of the Yangzi river.’ Source: China Visual Arts Project, University of Westminster.



Figure 6.2c: Chen Mou 陈谋 and Shu Dong 董舒. 1964. ‘Don't forget class struggle, forever make revolutionary people.’ Source: China Visual Arts Project, University of Westminster.



Figure 6.2d: National Fine Art Red Revolutionary Rebels Liaison Station 全国美术界红色革命造反联络站供稿. 1967. 'Revolutionary proletarian right to rebel troops unite!' Source: China Visual Arts Project, University of Westminster.

into something else, and thus he launched the Cultural Revolution. About one quarter of the CVAP collection covers this period (1966–1976), and these are quite distinct. Unlike posters from the previous political campaigns in which smiling workers, grinning peasants, and stalwart soldiers are constants, the Cultural Revolution faces show anger and defiance, bravery and suspicion. Figure 6.2d. shows an example of the period, where we see workers, peasants, and soldiers, and the central figure of a Red Guard, one of the youth Mao recruited to 'make revolution'.

Pedagogy: Posters are natural discussion and essay prompts, and I have used several as quiz prompts for years. In class, I usually employ the simple opening technique of showing (via PowerPoint) a poster, and asking students to look at it for about two minutes, and then they make comments using 'I like...' 'I noticed...', and 'I wonder...' as the prompts. A more detailed questionnaire is also used for the two-day version of the in-class discussion assignment.

Naturally, a little context for these posters is necessary for students who were born decades after the tumultuous periods of Chinese history from 1949 to 1990. After the Communist Revolution in 1949 there were multiple political campaigns such as the Great Leap Forward (1958–1961), and the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), and a dozen or more shorter and more specific campaigns. It helps that many of the posters at the China Visual Arts Project website



Figure 6.2e: Author unknown. 1975. 'Long live the unity of every nationality in this country!' Source: China Visual Arts Project, University of Westminster.

have dates to help place the pictures in the context of specific campaigns or events. The posters' text is also translated so that the phrase is clear (though not always the meaning).

Targeting an often semi-literate audience, the symbols used in the posters were usually quite simple: wrenches and gears or blue overalls indicate workers; uniforms show soldiers, sheafs and hoes show peasants, (what I dub the 'holy trinity' of Maoist iconography). Peasants in these posters are often shown wearing turbans, a common head covering among Han Chinese which some may mistake for ethnic minorities. Workers are often shown with iron and steel workers' furnace observation glasses. A fourth figure begins to be seen in posters after 1976: a scientist or 'intellectual' who is always shown wearing glasses. Age was usually depicted by heavier facial lines and beard shadows for men, hair in a bun for women.

Posters also are an opportunity for critical thinking, and nowhere is this more needed than the common posters involving China's 56 'official' ethnic minorities, such as the 1975 poster 'Long live the unity of every nationality in this country!' (Figure 6.2e). The poster is noteworthy in that it is a reproduction of a photograph, which is rare among Chinese posters of the period, though quite common for Soviet posters. Enthusiastic and grateful minorities are always shown in their distinctive national costumes, and a Tibetan woman wearing a *pangden* (brightly-coloured apron) is invariably included. Mongols can be identified by wearing the *deel*, a caftan garment, and Koreans are usually

women in *hanboks*. Other minorities such as the Miao and Yi are depicted with their distinct dress. The typical portrayal is of a large group of minorities, with Han Chinese posed in the middle, all linking arms, grinning broadly and grateful to be part of the PRC. Given the news out of Xinjiang of late about the treatment of Uighurs, students quickly recognise that the propaganda and the policies do not match.

6.3 At First Sight – Book Covers of the Mao Era

Marc Matten

For many decades, the visual arts have been a topic in research on modern Chinese history. Propaganda posters, Mao badges, and even material objects have received widespread attention among historians, thereby highlighting that an understanding of Mao-era China includes more than deciphering texts and comprehending their abstract rhetoric of exploitation, class struggle, and revolution. Propaganda posters, in particular, have been an object of desire, a desire that is sometimes shaped by a certain sense of orientalism, an identification with alternative models of society among activists during the Cold War, and sometimes by a morbid fascination with other relics from the Cultural Revolution. Tourists in China acquire reprints as souvenirs, collectors produce colourful catalogues, exhibitions are organised inside and outside of China, and iconic parts of posters are reproduced for merchandise articles, ranging from T-shirts to cups, from tote bags to fancy accessories.

Thanks to the long-term efforts of institutions such as the International Institute of Social History (Amsterdam) and the University of Westminster's China Visual Arts Project Archive, thousands of posters have also been made available for academic research in historical science and visual arts, allowing in-depth research on the history of propaganda in 20th-century China.

Propaganda posters were a central medium for political communication and could be seen virtually everywhere (to be sure, they were more present in cities than in the countryside). Following the guidelines for literature and art laid down in Mao Zedong's well-known *Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art* (*Zai Yan'an wenyi zuotanhui shang de jianghua* 在延安文艺座谈会上的讲话) dating from 1942, literature and art had to serve the masses of the people and reflect the 'correct' class standpoint. Art and literature were instrumental in the dissemination of the 'right' political consciousness, which also explains the unbroken continuity of propaganda until today.

Propaganda posters were, I argue, only one of many visual media that were at the disposal of the Communist Party-state. Next to newspapers, comics, films, and magazines that to various degrees relied on visual elements in disseminating political ideas, books played an important role. They were available in all sizes and paper qualities, printed in traditional or simplified characters,

covering everything from belletristic literature and school textbooks to handbooks and manuals in science and technology. Promoting reading as access to knowledge, reading in state-owned bookstores, in private spaces, and in libraries became a common phenomenon after 1949, particularly among the urban population.

Books were, however, more than text. Publisher and readers paid particular attention to book covers whose graphic design and aesthetics had started to change in the 1940s; this was when their visual language recombined the folk-art traditions that had been established during the Yan'an years with the graphic style from the Soviet Union and other countries of the Eastern bloc that were entering China by the rapidly growing number of translations.

The 1951 booklet *Invasion by Hollywood* (*Haolaiwu de qinlüe* 好莱坞的侵略) – a collection of articles denouncing movies and American influence on movies – is a compilation of translated newspaper articles by David Piatt, an American communist film critic, and texts by Chinese authors pointing to what they described as the brutal and savage, as well as anti-social and anti-human, character of Hollywood movies. The motive and design of the book cover imitates earlier ones from the Republican era.



Figure 6.3a: *Invasion by Hollywood* (1951).



Figure 6.3b: *Discussing the Invasion Pact of the United States and Chiang Kai-shek* (1955).

The 1955 book *Discussing the Invasion Pact of the United States and Chiang Kai-shek* (*Lun Mei-jiang qinlüe tiaoyue* 论美蒋侵略条约) is a short, yet dense, booklet of 48 pages written by Qin Ziqing 秦子青. Across six chapters, it describes how Chiang Kai-shek and John Foster Dulles concluded the Sino-American Mutual Defence Treaty (considered by the author as illegal), and how the Chinese people reject it due to their unshaken will to liberate Taiwan. The cover shows a caricature of a skeleton whose insignias show that it is Chiang who declares an attack on the mainland. The style of the caricature is a continuation from the satirical journal *World Knowledge* (*Shije zhishi* 世界知识) that the same company had been publishing in the Republican era.

The book *The Red Former Capital – Ruijin* (*Hongse gudu – Ruijin* 红色故都瑞金, 1958) by Wang Wenyuan 王文渊 describes the establishment of the first Soviet on Chinese soil in Ruijin. The narrative is supplemented with photos and maps. The cover itself reproduces the iconic stele commemorating the martyrs of the Red Army (*Hongjun lishi jinianta* 红军烈士纪念碑), choosing red as the primary colour, thereby conforming to the colourful style of socialist realism.

The publication entitled *Doing Everything to Strengthen the Dictatorship of the Proletariat* (*Yiqie weile gonggu wuchan jieji zhuanzheng* – 切为了巩固无产阶级专政) – printed at the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) – praises two traffic policemen who had made great sacrifices in their work, even



Figure 6.3c: *The Red Former Capital – Ruijin* (1958).

at their own risk of injury, to serve the people and apprehend the criminal class enemy. Though monocoloured and drawn in a simple fashion, it underlines the assertiveness of the policemen on their speedy motorbike.

The book covers presented above stem from one of the largest book collections of the Mao era in Germany, a donation of the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences (SASS) to the Friedrich-Alexander University of Erlangen-Nuremberg (FAU). In the early 2000s, the Academy had to sort out its duplicates, amounting to close to 100,000 monographs and roughly 10,000 bounded volumes of periodicals, all published from the late 1940s to the 1980s.

The openly accessible SASS collection features an assortment of publications ranging from translated Marxist classics to medical textbooks, from philosophical and literary works to agriculture handbooks and propaganda pamphlets, from popular youth magazines to academic journals. It also includes numerous ‘internal publications’ (*neibu* 内部) across all book categories. The largest categories are science and technology (19,000 volumes), economics, industry, agriculture, and commerce (15,000 volumes), history and historical science (11,000 volumes), as well as literature and arts (14,000 volumes).

The collection houses a large number of books on engineering (with blueprints of machines), geology, medicine, astronomy, veterinary medicine, etc.

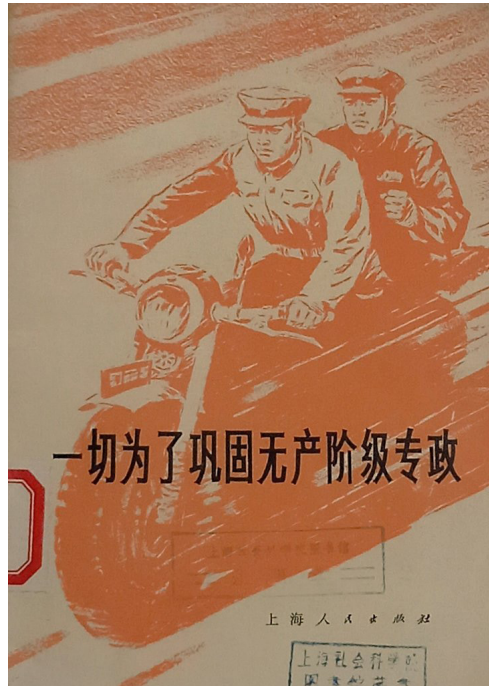


Figure 6.3d: *Doing Everything to Strengthen the Dictatorship of the Proletariat* (1975).

Researchers of history may trace the anti-Japanese sentiment in current China back to the publications on the Anti-Japanese War (1937–1945) in the 1950s and the 1960s. Internal publications highlight the ‘anti-Chinese expressions’ of the Soviet Communist Party and of Eastern European countries (e.g. Czechoslovakia), as well as detailed studies on criminal forensics and overviews on the status of nuclear physics research in the United States and Europe in the 1950–1960s. For researchers in the field of cultural studies, the collection offers material in Chinese and foreign literature, theatre, film, and music. The material on the perennial campaign of ‘Learning from Lei Feng’ display an impressive variety as oral performance (music/lyrics, traditional opera scripts, bamboo clapper talks), textual narrative (his diary, poems on Lei Feng, children’s stories, movie scripts) as well as picture albums. The abundance of scripts of drama and opera in the 1950s and 1960s can be used for investigating the modernising/propagandising process of these genres, as well as their role in promoting ideas of patriotism, class struggle, revolutionary spirit, and socialist construction in the first decades of the PRC, which offer new insights on cultural life, especially during the 1960s and 1970s.

Complete sets of journals such as *World Knowledge* 世界知识, *Knowledge is Power* 知识就是力量, *People’s Liberation Army Pictorial* 解放军画报, *Chinese*

Agricultural Science 中国农业科学, *Soviet Agricultural Science* 苏联农业科学, or *Artifacts of the Revolution* 革命文物, to name just a few, offer information on a whole array of topics.

The collection is accessible to researchers and PhD candidates. Due to its size, a catalogue is not available (yet), but a first impression of what is available can be gained by having a look at the bookshelves. Inquiries can be sent to Marc Matten, marc.matten[at]fau.de.

6.4 From Propaganda Posters to Covid Memes: Repackaging Chinese Posters in the Digital Age

Ruichen Zhang

Visual culture in the PRC features a rich collection of propaganda posters. With their unique visual style, language formation, and political messages, these posters are valuable for studying arts, social mobilisation, political persuasion, etc. across different periods in modern Chinese history. However, these posters are not just about the past. Indeed, they have also been variously revived in contemporary China in the form of memes across social media.

There are many examples of propaganda posters used as internet memes across a wide range of contexts. Just look at this poster below (Figure 6.4a). According to chineseposters.net, it originally comes from the Patriotic Health Campaign in 1952. The caption says 'To do a good job in epidemic prevention and hygiene work is concrete patriotic behaviour in the battle to smash American imperialist germ warfare' (*zuo hao fangyi weisheng gong zuo, jiushi fensui mei diguo zhuyi xijun zhan de juti aiguo xingdong* 作好防疫卫生工作, 就是粉碎美帝国主义细菌战的具体爱国行动). I came across this image on WeChat from one of my friends' 'moments' (*pengyou quan* 朋友圈). A Chinese postgraduate student studying abroad, he shared this image to complain about his roommates not paying enough attention to Covid and to express the importance of him staying alert and taking all necessary procedures to protect himself from Covid.

In recent years, repackaging propaganda posters in this way has become quite common on Chinese social media (see Zhang 2020). It is essentially a mockery of this 'red aesthetic' which emphasises a unity of political ideology and everyday experiences (Donald 2014), and more broadly, of the hypernormalised and formalistic rhetoric of the state. The gap often found between official rhetoric for political persuasion and multifarious everyday experiences can generate a particular type of 'incongruity humour', i.e. humour comprising two sharply contrasted elements to create effects of disappointment and tension relief (Monro 1951). It is largely because of this incongruity that netizens have found remaking propaganda posters with contemporary captions to be particularly amusing.



Figure 6.4a: Zhang Wenxin 张文新. 1952. 'To do a good job in epidemic prevention and hygiene work is concrete patriotic behaviour in the battle to smash American imperialist germ warfare!' Reproduced with kind permission of www.chineseposters.net (Private Collection).

For example, at the early stage of the coronavirus outbreak when many of the elderly in China refused to wear a face mask (see for example, Eckersley 2020), young netizens decided to use propaganda posters to persuade them. On 25 January 2020, Weibo user @你丫才美工 (@ni ya cai meigong) shared 18 photoshopped propaganda posters to help netizens persuade their elder family members to wear a face mask. Among them, as the image at Figure 6.4b states, 'Face mask or ventilator, you may need to choose one' (*kouzhao haishi huxi ji, nin lao kanzhe er xuan yi* 口罩还是呼吸机，您老看着二选一). Figure 6.4c states, 'Save a penny for a face mask, you will spend a fortune lying in hospital' (*sheng xiaoqian bu dai kouzhao, hua daqian wochuang zhi bing* 省小钱不戴口罩，花大钱卧床治病). While these memes were initially meant to persuade the elderly by way of using posters that some thought might be both familiar and eye-catching, they were largely welcomed and in fact primarily consumed by young netizens with laughter. It is hard to know to what extent elderly people found the repurposed posters to be in any way persuasive or if they did actually see them by chance, but we do know for certain that netizens found them extremely funny and that they quickly went viral on Weibo.



Figure 6.4b: 'Face mask or ventilator, you may need to choose one.' Source: Weibo.



Figure 6.4c: 'Save a penny for a face mask, you will spend a fortune lying in hospital.' Source: Weibo.

Propaganda posters repackaged as memes are also popular because they often imply a value contrast between collectivism and individualism. The posters above, for instance, attempt to persuade the elderly to wear a mask for their own good rather than for the country. By contrast, the 1952 epidemic poster above called for individual actions on disease prevention not because it was good for their own health, but because they were serving the country in doing so. A similar theme can be seen again at Figure 6.4d, where a soldier figure



Figure 6.4d: ‘I’m a socialist successor, I can’t be bothered with romance.’
Source: Weibo.

commonly seen in propaganda posters appears above the caption ‘I’m a socialist successor, I can’t be bothered with romance’ (*wo nai shehui zhuyi jieban ren, qi neng tan ernü qing chang* 我乃社会主义接班人，岂能谈儿女情长). While such expressions are now often used as a form of self-derogatory humour about being single, with the poster and socialist terminology used for further comic effect, it nevertheless points to a value contrast between prioritising ‘socialist construction’ and personal happiness.

It is, however, important to note that the subversion of authoritarian rhetoric and aesthetic of persuasion by means of repackaging propaganda posters does not necessarily imply subversion of the values behind the rhetoric. While in some cases as in the memes above there is indeed a mockery of collectivism, in other cases repackaged memes are in fact promoting the very same values. For example, Figure 6.4e, captioned an image of a soldier with ‘Imperialism fled away with its tail between legs’ (*diguo zhuyi jia zhe weiba taopao le* 帝国主义夹着尾巴逃跑了). Imperialist (which usually means Western) countries are apparently the target of ridicule, which is consistent with the official rhetoric. It can be used for nationalist comments on news like the Sino-US trade war, or more generally as humorous complaints about foreign employers at work. Another poster (Figure 6.4f) captions an image of a woman being praised and applauded in a crowd with ‘Those who choose socialism are blessed with good luck’ (*gao shehui zhuyi de ren yunqi dou bu hui tai cha* 搞社会主义的人运气都不会太差). Commonly used for self-encouragement among young people struggling with studies or work, this meme may also imply some degree of approval of, and identification with, socialism.

In most cases repackaged propaganda posters are not trying to promote any official political values at all. They are just a means of everyday self-expression



Figure 6.4e: ‘Imperialism fled away with its tail between legs.’ Source: Weibo.



Figure 6.4f: ‘Those who choose socialism are blessed with good luck.’ Source: Weibo.

on social media platforms. Another poster (Figure 6.4g), for instance, jokes ‘Gain weight in holidays, lose weight at work’ (*jiaqi li zhang de rou, yong jiaban shou huiqu* 假期里长的肉,用加班瘦回去), while another (Figure 6.4h) declares ‘C’mon! Let’s go argue with the production manager’ (*zou, he chanpin jingli sibi qu* 走!和产品经理撕逼去). Here, these memes have little to do with the values of China’s political system, whether ironic, supportive or subversive. Propaganda posters here are simply used as meme templates for personalised connotations.



Figure 6.4g: ‘Gain weight in holidays, lose weight at work.’ Source: Weibo.



Figure 6.4h: ‘C’mon! Let’s go argue with the production manager.’ Source: Weibo.

The fact that these ‘historical artefacts’ continue to have a social impact decades after they were first produced is not just about an interest in their ‘retro’ style, nostalgia for an imaginary past or even about subverting the values promoted within, but, as we have seen, it is also closely related to broader terms and aesthetics of public discourse on the Chinese internet. Whether netizens

agree with, disapprove of or feel indifferent about the values behind official discourse, the repurposing of these posters must be understood as part of the everyday visual practices of netizens across Chinese social media and therefore must be carefully contextualised for nuanced analysis. From the creativity of these memes with their diverse meanings and uses, we can see how Chinese netizens are playing an active role in constructing public discourse in the age of participatory media.

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