

Visualising Socialist Realism in *Xuānchuán huà* (1949-1976)

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ABSTRACT

The artworks produced during the Mao period (1949-1976) are ubiquitously seen as just propaganda, with complete condensation of the artist's position, accompanying practices or institutional spaces. This paper attempts to fill that lacuna by providing a constellation of the given epoch's diverse social, cultural, and aesthetic assemblage. It follows the trajectories of academic artists in China who worked with Konstantin M. Maksimov, the Soviet Art Educator. This academic training in Socialist Realism transgresses the contours of painting as a medium with foundational continuity visible in posters. Therefore, posters produced during this time are incredibly diverse in themes, and some are easily mistaken for paintings. This study examines the transition of art style from “importism” to developing a unique vocabulary separate from the Soviet model. A close analysis of these collections reveals the departures from earlier Soviet influences to a more contextual language specific to China.

Keywords

Chinese art, Socialist Realism, Mao period, Chinese propaganda posters, *Xuānchuán*, Art History

1. Introduction

“...should [propaganda posters] ... be described through their politics, their aesthetic organization, or their formal pictorial qualities? ... In any event, can the political content ever be truly separated from the aesthetic form in Marxist- Leninist-Maoist-inspired cultural production? The relationship between form and content is possibly the most fundamental sticking point in most debates on art and politics. The complexities involved in identifying the boundaries – if there are any – within that relationship may explain scholars’ reticence about poster art in China.”¹

“... it [the political content] can make the analyst blind to the range of stylistic and aesthetic qualities used in political posters and to the different ways in which they constituted their spectators as political subjects”²

-Evans and Donald

I begin with this text to illustrate the complexity of forming a narrative around these cultural artefacts. Chinese political posters, invariably referred to as propaganda posters by collectors in China and abroad, have increasingly been getting more attention in the past decade, demonstrated not just in recent exhibitions³, but through publications⁴ and discussions as well. This has led the collectors to engage with more diverse materials produced during the 1950s. However, contextualising and situating it within the larger social and political

¹ Evans, Harriet and Stephanie Donald. 1999. ‘Introducing Posters of China’s Cultural Revolution’, in *Picturing Power in the People’s Republic of China: Posters of the Cultural Revolution*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, pp. 9-10.

² Ibid, p. 10.

³ Such exhibitions include *Modern Chinese Political Posters* East Asia Library (2019), Stanford University; *Dazibao and Woodcut from 1960s China* (2017), Harvard University, Cambridge; *Cultural Dreams and Political Imagination: Modern China in the 20th Century* (2015), Candido Mendes University, Rio de Janeiro; *The Art of Influence: Asian Propaganda* (2013), British Museum, London; *Propaganda: Power and Persuasion* (2013), British Library, London; *Cultural Revolution: State Graphics in China in the 1960s and 1970s* (2011), Ashmolean Museum, Oxford; *Poster Power: Images from Mao’s China, Then and Now* (2011), Regent Street Gallery, University of Westminster; *Icons of Revolution* (2008), British Museum, London.

⁴ See also Barnes, *Museum Representations of Maoist China*; Barbara Mittler. 2013. *A Continuous Revolution: Making Sense of Cultural Revolution Culture*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; Melissa Chiu and Zheng Shengtian (eds.). 2008. *Art and China’s Revolution*. New York: Asia Society and Yale University Press; Lincoln Cushing and Ann Tompkins. 2007. *Chinese Posters: Art from the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution*. San Francisco: Chronicle.

discourse requires a thorough understanding of Chinese history and the context in which these posters were produced.

This could be the reason why all catalogues of recent exhibits give a short history of the Cultural Revolution instead of providing a nuanced understanding of the exhibits. While it may be a challenging task to provide diverse narratives in small wall text of 150 words surrounding the artefact, which is why the panel discussions following the exhibitions are charged with the responsibility to do so. One such exhibition titled ‘Red and Black Revolution’ organised by Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies, was held on 9 November 2017. The panel discussion following that started with Yale historian Denise Ho, who traced the material history of *dàzìbào* posters to a ceramics factory in Jingdezhen, Jiangxi Province.⁵ Art historian Julia Murray gave an art historical perspective on both *dàzìbào* and woodcuts from the pre-modern period to the contemporary era.⁶ Xiaofei Tian, professor of Chinese literature, focused on the rhetorical style of the posters thereby concluding how the repetitive use of the word *kan* shows these posters were meant for seeing and not reading.⁷ Jie Li delved more into the “everyday life” of people and the ways these posters were produced and received, experienced and remembered.⁸ Historian Roderick MacFarquhar delved into the emotional and mental disposition of writers of the posters as they were urged to produce *dàzìbào*.⁹

The historical precedents of these posters, however, have one thing in common, be in the text

⁵ Ho, Denise. ‘Reading Big-Character Posters’, Fairbank Center Blog, 7 November 2017, <https://medium.com/fairbank-center/exhibiting-the-cultural-revolution-part-1-reading-big-character-posters-d3edd7bb0104>

⁶ Murray, Julia. ‘Pictorial Posters’, Fairbank Center Blog, 17 November 2017, <https://medium.com/fairbank-center/exhibiting-the-cultural-revolution-part-4-pictorial-posters-4475daf92185>

⁷ Tian, Xiaofei. ‘The Visual Spectacle of Dazibao’, Fairbanks Center Blog, 14 November 2017, <https://medium.com/fairbank-center/exhibiting-the-cultural-revolution-part-2-the-visual-spectacle-of-dazibao-7a61d5ba684b>

⁸ Li, Jie. ‘Exhibiting the Cultural Revolution’, Fairbanks Center Blog, 15 November 2017, <https://medium.com/fairbank-center/exhibiting-the-cultural-revolution-part-3-dazibao-exhibitionism-3855a62a8bc6>

⁹ ‘Red and Black Revolution: Dàzìbào and Woodcuts from 1950s China’, YouTube video, 1:06:24, posted by the Fairbank Centre of Chinese Studies, Harvard University, 14 December 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AjbZOjLn7qY&t=4008s>

surrounding these artefacts, exhibition catalogues or discussions around them. The Soviet model is treated as a universal phenomenon, where other nation states like the PRC are visualised as an ideological extension of the Soviet Union, and the theories emanating from there. Scholars like Inkeles (1950), Kenez (1985), and Ebon (1987) who have done extensive research into Russian and Eastern European history, see the percolation of Soviet ideology in the Chinese Communist propaganda system through the Leninist rhetoric. On a similar note, in the book, *Chinese Communism and Rise of Mao*, Benjamin Schwartz reiterates the hegemonic discourse of orthodox Stalinist historiography. He claims that the Communist Party of China (CPC) owes its success to Stalin's alleged master planning.¹⁰

This, as we know, often reflects the idiosyncrasies of the author and may be coupled with the claims of ethnocentrism, leading to an inherent occidental nature in the selection of nations. Indeed, the Chinese communists did view themselves as part of the monolith of Marxist-Leninist ideology. Mao himself proclaimed to lean to the Soviet side in one of his speeches. Sinologist Stefan Landsberger claims that this practice percolated in the making of posters as well.¹¹ The Soviets were treated as *lao'da'ge* 老大哥 (elder brother) when it came to the depiction of modernisation in the PRC.

However, the interest in Marxism in China did not emerge solely as a result of the October Revolution. Rather, it can be traced back to the early 20th century. This period, marked by relentless foreign aggression, loot, and internal decay of the Qing dynasty, created a semi-feudal and semi-colonial China. It was during this time that Chinese reformers, facing the failure of various attempts at modernisation, including the Qing dynasty's westernization efforts, turned to Marxism as a potential solution (Adlakha 2022: 20). The adoption of Marxism by figures like Li Dazhao and Chen Duxiu was driven by the need to address China's economic and political backwardness (Adlakha 2022: 20). For this very reason, economic conditions were inappropriate for the Revolution, and were also the primary reason

¹⁰ The book doesn't stress on what is meant by the idea of "Stalin's masterplan", however, according to my understanding, I think the author suggests the concept of 'united front' propagated by Stalin where the genealogy of thought starts with Marx, and is carried forward by Lenin and Stalin. This was achieved by the founding of Communist International (also referred to as Comintern) by Lenin, an organisation which advocated communism for the entire world. The Communist Party in China was funded by Comintern.

¹¹ Landsberger, *Foreign Friends: The Soviet Union*, available at: <https://chinese posters.net/themes/soviet-union.php>. (Accessed on 10 December 2022).

behind departures from classical Marxist theory. One significant departure is the inclusion of “dispossessed peasantry” for the nations not in their pre-industrialisation phase of the Socialist Revolution. Some of the aspects retained from Marxist theory are the idea of Permanent Revolution, which was articulated by Qu Quibai and Chen Duxiu, and later functioned as a theoretical foundation for the Cultural Revolution; art functioning as subordinate to politics. Art functioning in subordination to politics can manifest itself in a myriad of ways. Socialist Realism, which emerged in the 1930s in the Soviet Union, is one manifestation that was later disseminated to other nations.

This paper is divided into two sections. It begins with contesting the pejorative term propaganda, which not only deters scholars to make an art historical study but limits the scope of analyses for these artefacts. It provides the Chinese terminology *xuānchuán* as a frame of reference rather than the propaganda model. The paper sketches out the similarities and differences between the two terms and why *xuānchuán* should be employed when assessing these posters. Since *xuānchuán* has multiple meanings, this research explores the cultural roots of this term by delving into the examples of *xuānchuán* in Ancient China. It further explores its key principles by engaging closely with Confucian Classics like the *Classic of Odes*¹² and evaluating the speech of the Soviet Writers Congress in Moscow in 1934, and Mao’s talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art in 1942.

The two speeches can be seen as the ideal illustrations of *xuānchuán* as they disseminate the government’s ideas on literature and art. This research charts out the similarities and points of departure from the Soviet axiom, thereby focusing on the *sinification* of this art style. The two are read together to explore the principles of Socialist Realism, the dominant art style during the given epoch. It further attempts to delineate the trajectory of Socialist Realism in the People's Republic of China (PRC) and, through that, analyse its main areas of concern. To trace this trajectory of the common ideological and stylistic influences of paintings in posters, this paper will delve into paintings and posters of the PRC’s academically trained artists. The categorisation of these artists will be based on the observed migration patterns in the

¹² The *Classic of Odes* (also known as the “Book of Songs”) was compiled around 600 BCE from an oral tradition going back perhaps as long as four centuries earlier. The Odes include court poetry and popular songs and poems. The Ode entitled “King Wen” celebrates the founding king of the Zhou dynasty and the Zhou’s subsequent conquest of the territory of the Shang dynasty in about 1045/40 BCE. The poem refers to a Zhou deity (*tiān*, translated here as “Heaven”) and a Shang deity (*di* or *Shangdi*, translated here as “God”).

dissemination of the theory of Socialist Realism. However, the research widens the time frame to include artists and educators already in contact with the theory before it was officially disseminated through the Party. It will be achieved by employing the methodology of John Clark of how the external or exogenous factors interact with, or are articulated through, the internal or endogenous. This relatively recent methodology attempts to transgress the articulation of theory from the lens of cultural hegemony, as seen in the case of Marxism. Furthermore, it moves away from ‘totalitarianism’ being used as a point of reference in comparative studies which examine cultural production by foregrounding the strong vigilance of the Party.

This methodology enables one to fill the lacuna by exploring the diverse range of posters in collections held in China and abroad and the ways in which these art practices intersected with each other to form a new aesthetic component. I hope to study these works and their significant role in the formation of a unique artistic tradition specific to their history and culture.

2. Cultural Gap between Propaganda and *Xuānchuán*

Fellows (1959) has delved into myriad ways in which the word propaganda was used: from its origins in biology to its subsequent evolution to signify the dissemination of religion and establishment of power. According to him, the negative overtone the term acquired was due to the hostility between Protestant and Catholic faiths in Europe. However, the term was used extensively during the First World War, when it was accompanied by psychological catalysts to convey edifying ideas (Jowett 1987; Sproule 1987; Whitton 1951).

This shift to the political is seen with different regimes of the 20th century where propaganda is built on the foundation of deception and exaggerations. This area of scholarship has emerged as a melting pot that has enabled an interdisciplinary dialogue in humanities. Studies like Bernays (1933), Doob (1935), Freud (1949), Ellul (1965), Adorno (1978), Jowett and O’Donnell (1986), Pratkanis and Aronson (1992), and Rushkoff (2000) are from diverse disciplines of anthropology, art, communication, history, psychology, and sociology.

Although previously government propaganda was referred to as “great innovation” (Whitton 1951: 142), currently, the word propaganda conveys “conspiratorial and anti-democratic” activities in the West (Socolow: 2007). Due to this hegemonic discourse, terms like ‘brainwashing’, ‘lies’ and ‘exaggeration’ are synonymous with propaganda in totalitarian regimes. This, a rather nefarious connotation, often supplanted with studies mentioned above, is a frequent frame of reference in the study of Chinese posters.

However, the Chinese terminology for the word propaganda is *xuānchuán*¹³ 宣传, which implies the broadcasting of information. Composed of two terms, *xuān* 宣 and *chuán* 传, the term implies disseminating information. Therefore, the terminology employed in China for news coverage is *xīnwén xuānchuán* which might loosely translate as ‘news propaganda’ in English. Other meanings of this word include ‘announce’ and ‘convey’ as used in *xuānchuán zhèngcè* or publicising; explaining and educating people; a form of communication from the ruler to the ruled (Lin 2017).

It should be noted that previously, *xuān* 宣 referred to the imperial houses, the abode of emperors. *Chuán* 传 implies grant, transmission or delivery. Later, the meaning of *xuānchuán* extended to vastness and universality, which referred to the top-down transmission of instructions from the concerned authorities. The combination of both words *xuān* and *chuán*, Liu (2020: 32) in his study dates back to the book *Chronicles of the State of Wei - Biography of Lifu*, where Lifu said:

“Currently, all the citizens, stronger or vulnerable, were fighting against each other, rendering the city tumultuous [and] in great panic. So, I think it’s better to delegate someone who has newly surrendered and is trusted by besieged citizens to announce (宣) and deliver (传) the policies of the conqueror”.

¹³ Oxford dictionary defines the word propaganda as “information, especially of a biased or misleading nature, used to promote a political cause or point of view.” The term *xuānchuán* is made up of two terms – *xuān* (宣), which means to “declare; proclaim; announce” (DeFrancis 2009, 1087) and *chuán* (傳 or 传), is to “pass (on); hand down; impart; teach; spread; infect; be contagious” (DeFrancis 2009, 124). Therefore, in China, news coverage is often referred as *xīnwén xuānchuán* which translates to English as ‘news propaganda’. Likewise, mainland Chinese journalists call themselves *gāo xuānchuándé* or the people doing propaganda.

This integrated expression, of the terms *xuān* and *chuán*, Liu (2020: 32) explores, is also found in *Warriors of Fate - the Book of Shu - Biography of Peng Yang*:

“As Liu Bei was surprised by Peng Yang’s performance, he thought highly of Yang and promoted him as the delegate to announce (宣) and deliver (传) the emperor’s military instructions to guide other generals’ operations. His mission satisfied the emperor, thus gaining greater appreciation and promotion from the emperor.”

Additionally, it also appears in the *History of Three Kingdoms - the Book of Shu - Biography of Ma Zhong*, which states:

“When seeing the Minister of Defense, General Jiang Wan, he announced (宣) and delivered (传) the emperor’s appointment of him as the general to safeguard the southern territories”.

It is evident that 宣传 had already developed into an idiomatic expression in Chinese by the end of the Eastern Han Dynasty. The connotation has nothing to do with the modern meaning of word propaganda. The western notion of propaganda was assigned to *xuānchuán* by western missionaries who preached in China during the late Ming and Qing dynasties. This meaning was adopted and integrated by the Japanese and was introduced by the Chinese students who came back after visiting Japan in the early 20th century, as written in the *Dictionary of Loanwords in Chinese*:

“宣传 (*xuānchuán*): to explain to the public so as to convince them to follow certain acts.

[Origin] [Japanese] 宣伝 *senden*. (In the ancient work, *Book of the Northern Qi Dynasty: Biography of Yuan Wenyaoyao*, Wenxiang was appointed to propagandize the government’s ideas and philosophies to all the officials).”

This period of 19th and 20th centuries coincided with the intellectual pursuit of democracy where there was an influx of western ideas in society. The term entered the political discourse

in the 1920s when the Kuomintang adopted the Soviet model with the purpose of mobilising the public, where it functioned more as a tool of ‘social integration’. Chungfeng Lin (2017), in his article, delves into the *xuānchuán* model. Since the pinnacle of this model was in the ancient era, Lin’s historical analysis narrates an account of *xuānchuán* being limited to elites and their aristocratic schools in the beginning. Due to widespread ill-literacy, this technique was used by elites for mass persuasion through word of mouth. Therefore, it functioned more as a tool for ‘social communication’ or ‘social integration’.¹⁴ Later, however, the Party used this model for the dissemination of information to the proletariat. Therefore, in addition to oral propaganda, the printed versions played an additional role during the Cultural Revolution. Therefore, the roots differ from the West. The former is rooted in word of the mouth whereas the latter in mass media.

Another characteristic of *xuānchuán* is that it was perceived as the best means of governance, which can be dated back to pre-Qin dynasty (c. 2070 BCE- 221 BCE) thinkers like Confucius and Mencius’ school of thought. According to Mencius, propaganda should be a part of education to garner support from people for proper governance. As a result, Confucian axioms of *zhong* 忠 (loyalty) and *xiao* 孝 (filial piety), which were fundamental values of Ming and Qing dynasties, are still practised in present-day China.

Lin speculates this ideological foundation of *xuānchuán* in China was specific to China and only possible due to the absence of religion. Therefore, it acted as a proxy and as mentioned above, a unifying source for the party. Another reason is “the role of collectivism as a cultural pattern”. Since *xuānchuán*’s core value is the integration of the masses, this paves the way for a Confucian harmonious society where a rule is respected and obeyed.

The cultural and historical roots of *xuānchuán* not only put these works in context but helps the viewer/reader to commence from a neutral point. This multiplicity of perspectives enables the enthusiasts to mitigate the interpretative privilege of certain types of experience too. As Craig Clunas (1999: 60) puts it, it will enable us to move away from using the visual culture to simply illustrate the “increasingly contested grand narratives” of a particular period. One

¹⁴ Which should not be confused with the term ‘agitation propaganda’ employed in the Soviet Union.

such narrative is bought forth by the Shanghai collector, Yang Peiming, for whom posters evoke different images and memories. Speaking about his collection he agrees, “...the English version Propaganda is not exactly the Chinese version of what *xuānchuán* means. *Xuānchuán* is not on the bad side meaning, basically just means spreading the information. So, you can see most of the Chinese posters are not just propaganda.”¹⁵

Nonetheless, the word propaganda attracts the attention of foreigners, which may be the reason why, despite there being several translations of *xuānchuán*, propaganda is the most widely used in the West. This has led to publicity being often used interchangeably with propaganda. This could be because Party offices employ this terminology, like *zhōngyāng xuānchuán bù* 中央宣传部 (Central Propaganda Department), which due to negative connotations, changed the English translation from “Propaganda” to the “Publicity Department” (Shambaugh 2007: 47; Hassid 2007: 415). Other synonyms which are used in translation, other than “publicity” are “information” and “political communication” (Brady 2008: 73). This is observed by the way politicians are addressed abroad. Ding Guangen, a senior politician of the 1990s, is referred to as the Minister of Information on his official visits outside China.

Therefore, these multiple meanings need revising. The online *Xīnhuá Zìdiǎn* (Xinhua Dictionary) provides two definitions. The first is the popular one, to inform/convey information, similar to the one discussed above. The second is about explaining it to the masses. Examples given for the latter one are *xuānchuán dǎng de zhèngcè* (propagandizing the Party’s policies) and *xuānchuán duìyuán* (a propaganda team member).

Baidu Baike provides a compound view of the terminology. It starts with the meaning in the West and moves on to provide a couple of definitions of *xuānchuán* in the Chinese context: *xuānbù chuándá* 宣布传达 “to announce or convey information”, *xiàng rén jiǎng jiě* 向人讲解说明, *jìnxíng jiàoyù* 进行教育 “to explain something to someone, or to conduct education”, and *chuánbō* 传播, *xuānyáng* 宣扬 “to disseminate or publicise”. The next section delves into the examples of these definitions.

¹⁵ Yang Peiming, email message to author, 13 September 2020.

2.1 Vicissitudes of the Concept of *Xuānchuán huà* (Propaganda Art)

The meaning of “to announce or convey information” was initially documented in historian Chen Shou's *Records of the Three Kingdoms* (3rd Century CE). This term was specifically used in the context of transmitting military orders. For instance, the biography of General Ma Zhong of the Shu Han dynasty (d. 249 CE) recounts his appointment as the General Who Pacifies the South after defeating rebels in Nanyue. He was then instructed to return to the capital in Chengdu.

“In 242, when [Ma Zhong] was returning to court, upon reaching Hanzhong, he went to see Grand Marshall Jiang Wan, who conveyed an imperial decree that he was also appointed General in Chief of Zhennan Circuit [in modern Nanchang, Jiangxi].”

Later usage examples are cited by historian Li Baiyao 李百藥 (564–647 CE), poet Cao Tang 曹唐 (fl. 860-874 CE), and scholar Wang Mingqing 王明清 (1163-1224 CE).

In the ancient era, the concept of *tiān mìng*¹⁶ (Heaven’s Mandate) was employed as a means of legitimation of rule. The *Classic of Odes*, a Confucian text from the Zhou Dynasty (1046-256 BCE) might illustrate the *xuānchuán* model. The values of *zhong* and *xiao* in the text can be traced back to stanzas four, five and six of the text (fig 1.1, 1.2, 1.3). The Ode refers to King Wen, who overthrew the Shang rule. Later, however, after his death, his brother, the Duke of Zhou became the regent and played an important role in establishing the rule of Zhou kingdom.

¹⁶ The Mandate of Heaven is a Chinese political and religious teaching that was used in Ancient and Imperial China to justify the rule of the King or the Emperor of China. According to this belief, Heaven (天, *tiān*) embodies the natural order and the will of the just ruler of China, the “Son of Heaven” of the “Celestial Empire”. If a ruler was overthrown, this was interpreted as an indication that the ruler was unworthy, and had lost the Mandate. It was also a common belief that natural disasters such as famines and floods were divine retributions bearing signs of Heaven’s displeasure with the ruler, so there would often be revolts following major disasters as the people saw these calamities as signs that the Mandate of Heaven had been withdrawn.

King Wen 《文王》
From the *Classic of Odes*
IV
August was King Wen,
Continuously bright and reverent.
Great, indeed, was the Mandate of Heaven.
There were Shang's grandsons and sons,
Shang's grandsons and sons.
Was their number not a hundred thousand?
But the High Di gave his Mandate,
And they bowed down to Zhou.

上商假穆
帝之哉穆
既孫天文
命子命王

侯其有於
于麗商緝
周不孫熙
服德子敬
止

King Wen 《文王》
From the *Classic of Odes*
V
They bowed down to Zhou;
the Mandate of Heaven is not unchanging.
Those officers of Yin, refined and timely,
now offer libations in our capital.
They make offerings of libations,
wearing their embroidered robes and native caps.
Oh, loyal servants to the king,
Think always of your ancestors!

王厥殷侯
之作士服
蓋裸膚于
臣將敬周

無常裸天
念服將命
爾嗣于京
祖尋常

1.1 William Kirby, King Wen from *Classic of Odes*. Screenshot from online lecture at edx, 29 July 2018, Cambridge, United States, MP3 file, 4:36, <https://learning.edx.org/course/course-v1:HarvardX+SW12.1x+3T2021/blockv1:HarvardX+SW12.1x+3T2021+type@sequential+block@09c055bc30bf454e82095012bb16a895/blockv1:HarvardX+SW12.1x+3T2021+type@vertical+block@faa5192b25f74c0f92ab742bffb7f58>

1.2 William Kirby, King Wen from *Classic of Odes*. Screenshot from online lecture at edx, 29 July 2018, Cambridge, United States, MP3 file, 4:39, <https://learning.edx.org/course/course-v1:HarvardX+SW12.1x+3T2021/blockv1:HarvardX+SW12.1x+3T2021+type@sequential+block@09c055bc30bf454e82095012bb16a895/blockv1:HarvardX+SW12.1x+3T2021+type@vertical+block@faa5192b25f74c0f92ab742bffb7f58>

King Wen 《文王》
From the *Classic of Odes*
VI
Think always of your ancestors,
and cultivate virtue.
Always strive to accord with the Mandate,
and seek for yourself many blessing.
Before Yin [Shang] lost their multitudes,
They were in accord with the High Di.
Look to Yin as you would a mirror,
The great Mandate is not easy to keep.

宜殷永無
鑒之言念
于未配爾
殷喪命祖

駿師自聿
命克求脩
不易上福厥
帝

1.3 William Kirby, King Wen from *Classic of Odes*. Screenshot from online lecture at edx, 29 July 2018, Cambridge, United States, MP3 file, 4:39, <https://learning.edx.org/course/course-v1:HarvardX+SW12.1x+3T2021/blockv1:HarvardX+SW12.1x+3T2021+type@sequential+block@09c055bc30bf454e82095012bb16a895/blockv1:HarvardX+SW12.1x+3T2021+type@vertical+block@faa5192b25f74c0f92ab742bffb7f58>

The ballad begins with the demise of King Wen, who after his death, went to heaven where the names of both the Gods from the Shang and Zhou are deliberately conflated together. Thereby, *Di*, the Shang God is often written together with the Zhou God, Heaven's Mandate (fig 1.1). Although history mentions a war between the two rulers, the ballad revisits the past to the Shang welcoming the submission before the Zhou God and accepting him as Heaven's Mandate (fig 1.2). The line "Always strive to accord with the Mandate, and seek for yourself many blessings" (fig 1.3) reiterates the *zhong* axiom of *xuānchuán*.

The *xuānchuán* meaning of “to explain something to someone, or to conduct education” first appeared in Ge Hong’s 葛洪 (c. 320 CE) *Baopuzi* criticism of effete scholars whom Emperor Zhang of Han (r. 75-88 CE) extravagantly rewarded. Subsequent usages are quotes from monk-translator Pukong 不空 or Amoghavajra (705–774 CE), poet Wang Yucheng 王禹偁 (954–1001 CE), novelist Ba Jin (1904-2005), and Mao Zedong (1893-1976). Mao's (1957) “The Speech for the Chinese Communist Party National Propaganda Work Meeting” (tr. Leung 1992: 379) says:

“Our comrades who are engaged in propaganda work have the task of disseminating Marxism. This is a gradual [task of] propaganda and should be done well, so that people are willing to accept it.”

The modern *xuānchuán* meaning of “to disseminate or publicize” occurred in Lao She's (1937) *Camel Xiangzi* or *Rickshaw Boy* (tr. Goldblatt 2010: 48):

“As promised, Old Man Liu told no one of Xiangzi’s experiences [selling stolen wartime camels for 30 yuan], but the camel story quickly spread from Haidian into the city.”

The *Hànyǔ Dà Cídiǎn* gives two other usage examples from novels by Zhao Shuli (1906-1970). This paper deals with a combination of the second meaning of *xuānchuán* where the official documents are elucidating upon the role of art and politics and the ways in which art shall be subordinate to politics.

These principles could be translated and found in the words of rulers and ideas promoted in congresses in the modern age. The fundamental tenets of the art style, Socialist Realism, for instance, were established at the Soviet Writers’ Congress in Moscow in 1934. These new ideas acted as a guiding directive to the art movement. These principles, borrowed from Soviet aesthetics, and governed literature too, in addition to art. These are *narodnost*, *klassovost*, *partiinost* and *dostubnost*.¹⁷ *Narodnost*, which literally means people-ness, has a

¹⁷ I have taken these principles from James, Vaughan. 1973. *Soviet Socialist Realism*. United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan. However, *dostubnost* is not mentioned by the author and I have added this aspect after viewing the artworks. The combinations of these principles vary from study to study. *Massovost* (mass character), *klassovost* and *partiinost* are used in the book *Film Theory: Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies*; *narodnost*, *klassovost*, *partiinost* and *ideinost* (moral aspect) are used in *The Russian Classical Literary Heritage and the Basic Concepts of Soviet Literary Education*.

wide semantic range. It could mean simplicity or elements of folk art in creative pursuits or the relationship of people with the masses. It also functioned as a leading argument to fight against formalism and naturalism in art. *Partiinost* pertains to the reflection of the Communist Party ideology in the artworks. The relation of the artist with the Party is clearly delineated in Lenin's article on Party Organisation and Party Literature in 1905. *Klassovost* has, on the other hand, a reference to the class aspect of the artists. *Dostubnost* implies easily comprehensible works, which are a reflection of the demands of the masses.

These concepts formed the base for socialist realist aesthetics. The triad of *partiinost*, *ideinost*, and *narodnost* were officially acknowledged as the central concepts of Socialist Realism. However, the portrayal of the above-mentioned principles surfaced as one of the major concerns amongst the artists, which was elaborated upon in the Congress. Art should meet the demands of the masses, thereby making it “realist in style and socialist in content” (Rusnock 2010: 14). Other aspects were concerned with the portrayal of reality, which was delineated by Andrei Zhdanov, the representative of the Party, in his speech during the Congress¹⁸, and Mao's address at Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art in the PRC. Also known as the Yan'an Talks, this was the part of Rectification Movements carried out by the CPC from 1943 onwards to establish Mao's leadership. Both the documents, when read together, reveal some synchrony in themes and their subsequent points of departure.

Zhdanov, elucidated the *partiinost* element of Soviet aesthetics and advocated the style of Socialist Realism. Although most of his talk focuses on literature, there are no sections specifically dedicated to visual arts. One can draw a connection between the writers and the artists. In the speech, he elucidates how artists are “engineers of human soul” by depicting not just the “objective reality” but the “revolutionary development”. This, when combined with “ideological remoulding” defines the socialist realist style.

The phrase “engineers of human”, however, has a range of meanings. First, being the obvious interpretation, isolating the word “engineer”, pointing towards the underlying ideological

¹⁸ See Braz, Jose (trans.) ‘Soviet Literature - the Richest in Ideas, the Most Advanced Literature’, Soviet Writers Congress 1934. https://www.marxists.org/subject/art/lit_crit/sovietwritercongress/zhdanov.htm. (Accessed on 28 December 2022).

message in the artworks meant to “engineer” the minds of people. This basic analysis of control being exerted through art is further supported by lines like:

Create works of high attainment, of high ideological and artistic content.

Actively help to remold the mentality of people in the spirit of socialism¹⁹

Second, elucidating upon the pivotal role of artists, referred as “engineers”, in the making of the nation, Groys (2011: 60) is vociferous about the underlying message, that is, reliance on pure willpower to surpass any indomitable obstruction, disseminated by slogans like “Nothing is impossible for a Bolshevik”, “will of steel” and “engineers of human soul”. The word “engineers” reiterates the government’s faith in technology, which is embodied by the Soviet public, transforming the faith further into an irrational belief in human strength mentioned above.

Another possible meaning of this phase could be that writers shape the superstructure. This, when juxtaposed with Mao’s address at Yan’an, acquires a meaning inclusive of the historical sense of both the speeches. Mao’s words, “Revolutionary literature and art are the products of the reflection of the life of the people in the brains of revolutionary writers and artists” points to art being shaped and maintained by the base thereby laying emphasis on the dialectical relationship of the base and the superstructure.

Coming to the principle of depicting “reality in revolutionary development”; although Zhdanov or Mao did not directly elucidate on this term, Mao did make comments on “revolutionary art” which leads to development. He suggested that “revolutionary art should create a variety of characters out of real life and help the masses to propel history forward”, which simply means to project the struggles of real life in works of art which in turn, would awaken and unite them to transform their environment. He further elaborates on the way of achieving it. “Writers and artists should study society, that is to say, should study the various classes in society, their mutual relations and respective conditions, their physiognomy and

¹⁹ Speech by A. A. Zhdanov, delivered at the Soviet Writers Congress. Accessed at - https://www.marxists.org/subject/art/lit_crit/sovietwritercongress/zhdanov.htm

their psychology. Only when we grasp all this clearly can we have a literature and art that is rich in content and correct in orientation.”²⁰ Although the former line is directly quoted from Lenin, “art should serve ... the millions and tens of millions of working people”, Mao goes further to define and classify the audience for art specific to the PRC by dividing “working people”²¹ into four classes: workers, peasants, armed soldiers and labouring masses²² thereby adhering to the *klassovost* principle laid by Lenin.

Another unifying element is observed in the relationship of Socialist Realism to its predecessor, Realism. Mao proclaims, “Marxism embraces [but cannot replace] realism in literary and artistic creation.” However, since realism, is concerned with portraying the gloomy reality, art should move more towards popularisation, where the message is simple so that it is easier to comprehend for the masses.²³ He also claimed to lean to the Soviet side when it comes to “raising the standards”.

Coming to the subject matter of art, Zhdanov asked the writers and artists to draw their material from real life heroes, such as people working in collective farms, Party members and engineers to name a few. This thematic preference was also referred to in Mao’s speech which elucidates on the phrase “art should serve the masses” and the means of achieving it.

“[mass style] means that the thoughts and feelings of our writers and artists should be fused with those of the masses of workers, peasants and soldiers. To achieve this fusion, they should conscientiously learn the language of the masses.”

Although the formulations of Soviet Writers Congress served as a relevant historical guide

²⁰ Mao Zedong, ‘Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art’. Accessed at - https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-3/mswv3_08.html

²¹ Ibid.

²² Para I, Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

for Chinese socialist cultural policy, it was the PRC's complex political, revolutionary, and cultural histories that served as a prelude to Socialist Realism's theory (Xudong 1997: 290). This could be one of the reasons why some scholars refer to Socialist Realism in the PRC as "cultural folklore".

There is no denying of the fact that in the beginning, the Soviet Union was treated as an archetype for modernisation, and Soviet aesthetics worked as a framework to provide validity to achieve worldly progress. In the early 1950s, the Soviet Union functioned as the epitome of progress and modernity not only for the CPC but for the people as well. Therefore, Soviet values and aesthetics worked as ideological frameworks to achieve massive industrialisation. This was the time when Socialist Realism seems to have represented all the principles of representing the "reality in revolutionary development".

Thereafter, a new political and social mobilisation occurred during the Korean War (1950-53), and the Three-Anti and Five-Anti Campaigns, which swept away the intellectual democratic influence (a result of national United Front policy) from the PRC. The First Five-Year Plan (1953-57) and the Great Leap Forward, also known as the Second Five-Year Plan (1958-62) led to mass movements for industrial and economic growth. It was during this time that the socialist realist style was steeped with "revolutionary romanticism". Although this term was previously employed by some Soviet writers, critics, and literary theorists, its function in the PRC was to register the ongoing revolutionary fervour which also included the local cultural and symbolic imagery. "Revolutionary romanticism", thus, functioned as a point of departure in the Chinese variant of Socialist Realism. This "revolutionary romanticism" when combined with "revolutionary realism" resulted in a utopian space where the historical telos is manifested by displaying the completion of ongoing socioeconomic and ideological construction. This space is where Mao's idea of "continuous revolution" is merged with Socialist Realism's principle of depicting reality as timeless spatialisation.

"We should take over the rich legacy and the good traditions in literature and art that have been handed down from past ages in China and foreign countries..."²⁴. This line emphasises

²⁴ In later years, however, Mao diverged from Lenin on the theory of new culture. Lenin believed that new culture splintered off from an older culture, for instance, that Marxism was a fragment of Hegelianism, and realism of classicism. On the other hand, Mao held that only through the total destruction of old culture could a

the stark difference from its Soviet counterpart, where there was a complete negation of history and culture. Whereas, Mao did not denounce the older styles in order to establish new ones.²⁵

While Cultural Revolution (1966-76) was intended to pave the way for Mao's idea of "continuous revolution" and purge the capitalist elements of the bureaucracy, this era saw an evolution of ideas in art and literature. Realism was replaced by "an idiosyncratic mixture of revolutionary fanaticism and dogmatism, on the one hand, and pragmatic experimentation, on the other (Xudong 1997: 291). It is argued that it was during this period that the art production methods during the Cultural Revolution brought down Mao's foundation of ideas on art and literature and, by extension, Socialist Realism.

3. Migrations of Ideas

Gombrich, in *Art and Illusion*, states that art is closely entwined with its tradition whether it is accepted, rejected or modified (1984: 148). This does not imply that the changes are in chronological, gradual order; rather, at times, change is sudden and a violent reaction to the traditional. Coming to the artists, the question of adoption or rejection of an alien form or theory entirely depends on the fulfilment of their essential needs.

This complexity is also pointed out by Said (1983: 243) in his theorisation of the "travelling theory", where theories are assigned meanings according to "where, when and how they are deployed". He categorises the whole process of the movement of ideas into four stages. First, the circulation of theory leads to a break from the place of origin which, thereby, leads him to further question, whether, after transmission from one place and point of time to the other, the theory serves the same vigour for which it was created. Second, a theory is always subjected to modification, hence, it is a perpetual work in progress. Third, this modification or adaptation is influenced with the new historical and political ethos, local axioms, and taboos. Fourth, this theory, now acquires new ethos thereby becoming a tool to interpret the local

new culture in service of the people be constructed. This is the very reason behind the closing of the art academies, children's palaces and villages which established art training courses.

²⁵ Para II, Ibid.

social reality. Therefore, this section evaluates the paradigm shift, accelerated by escalation and, later a decline of specific stylistic aspects, which in turn led to the creation of new artistic cannons, characteristic of the making of national formations in art.

This phenomenon can be observed in the case of the PRC. Recent Chinese historiography is mindful of the complicity of Stalin's world view of Communist International and the older texts of traditional Stalinist historiography. However, it is time to move away from the European hegemonic framework of seeing Asian works as an exogenous (external) phenomenon with complete ignorance of endogenous (internal) forces of the given epoch. Rather, they should be seen as an interaction between the two, the external and the internal forces. Therefore, by employing the methodology of John Clark (2014: 70), this paper attempts to map the complex endogenous forces which played an imperative role in the development of the theory of Realism to Socialist Realism to Mao's Revolutionary Realism. This deconstruction is imperative to pave the way for imaginative renewal. Based on the empirical model of John Clark (2014: 70-73), a comprehensive mapping of art cohorts with their artworks and epochs is done by forming chronological categories which are interlaced with its stylistic trajectories. These are:

Foreign Influence and Realism

Socialist Realism

Transformation into Maoist Revolutionary Realism

The siting of artists is indispensable in this art discourse. *Type One* are those who went abroad to learn the techniques. Artists sent between 1953-56 to Repin Art Academy in Leningrad²⁶ for the six-year course come under this categorisation, like Li Tianxiang, Chen Zunsan, Lin Gang, Quan Shanshi, Xiao Feng, Deng Shu (*nianhua* artist), and Li Jun. *Type Two* consists of artists who did not travel abroad, and were in contact with the alien style through foreign teachers in educational institutions. In this case, the mastery achieved by artists in this category is through exogenous forces. Artists who studied under Maksimov come to this study as seen in the chart below.

²⁶ Julia Andrews compiles the list in her book, *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1979*.

Categories	Type One The ones who went abroad to learn the techniques.	Type Two Artists who did not travel abroad and were in contact with the alien style through foreign teachers in educational institutions. In this case, the mastery achieved by artists in this category is through exogenous forces.
Foreign Influence and Realism	USSR: Li Tianxiang, Chen Zunsan, Lin Gang, Quan Shanshi, Xiao Feng, Deng Shu (<i>nianhua</i> artist), and Li Jun France: Xu Beihong, Yen Wen-liang, Hsu Pei-hung, Pang Xunqin, Liu Haisu and Lin Feng-mien	Li Keran (studied under Lin Feng-min and French professor André Claudot)
Socialist Realism	Yan Han Jiang Feng and Cai Ruohong	Hou Yimin Jin Shangyi Liu Chunhua (studied under Lin Gang) Zhan Jianjun Wu Dezu
Transformation into Maoist Revolutionary Realism	Vietnam: Dong Xiwen	Hou Yimin Jin Shangyi Liu Chunhua Zhan Jianjun Wu Dezu

3.1 Foreign Influence and Realism

Among the plethora of *isms* introduced to China in the 20th century, Realism garnered the most attention from reformist artists and intellectual circles. Thinkers like Hu Shi, Chen Duxin and Li Dazhao were against the traditional culture and referred to it as *jing* (passive) (Li 1993: xi). Chen Duxiu and Lu Xun were in favour of reforming the traditional literati painting. Other than that, Kang Youwei, Chen Duxiu, Xu Beihong, and Cai Yuanpei, the most influential figures in the intellectual circles, agreed with the idea that art had stagnated. They delineated the reasons behind the fall of the literati painting to its inability to depict the objective reality. Sherman Lee, in *Far Eastern Art*, notes the repetitiveness of painting in China since 1800. “Although interesting work surfaced from time to time.... these add nothing to a general survey of the field”. The May Fourth Movement played a pivotal role in activating the *dong* (active) aspect of the Western model of art, which had a physical engagement with reality.

Huang Binhong hoped for the development of traditional literati art as a process where its classical language would be transformed into a modern one. However, with an urge towards development, there emerged a cultural debate between artists who wanted to modernise the language and the ones who wanted to replace it altogether. Xu Beihong, an artist who had studied in France, was a part of the latter group which advocated for the replacement of the “disengaged” literati painting aesthetic with Realism.

Beihong, however, cannot be credited for introducing European art forms to the PRC. There are Western stylistic aspects seen in the artworks of the 17th century, possibly transmitted through the ports in Shanghai and Canton. However, when it comes to formal education, it was during 1906-09 when a Western art department began to operate in Nanking Normal School (Clunas 1989: 100). This is also the period of Chinese students²⁷ visiting the Tokyo School of Fine Arts to learn art. Nevertheless, the art scene in Japan was itself a result of Japanese artists introducing the European style after returning from France. In 1919, due to the rise of anti-Japanese sentiments, the young Chinese painters preferred Europe over Japan.

²⁷ Gao Jianfu, Li Shutong, Chen Baoyi, He Xiangning. The names are taken from the website of CAFA named CAFA ART INFO. <http://www.cafa.com.cn/en/opinions/reviews/details/8325814>.

Therefore, France became the most favoured destination for Chinese students. Many artists chose to relocate themselves in order to acquire knowledge first hand. Realism was not the only style that engaged the intelligentsia and the artists. Artists who went abroad were also exposed to Surrealism and Impressionism. Sullivan (1973: 167) elaborately documents the Chinese artists in France and their career trajectories on returning to China. Chou Ling, founder of *Association des Artistes Chinois en France* was one of the artists who went to France to learn art. Amongst those who returned and taught on similar lines in China, were Yen Wen-liang, Hsu Pei-hung, Pang Xunqin, Liu Haisu and Lin Feng-mien (Sullivan 1973: 167).

These artists, on returning, set up art schools on the Beaux Arts model.²⁸ The art schools were meant to introduce new trends in the art world. They, therefore, stressed upon primarily Western art styles. This pattern of education was taught in Lin Feng-mien's school, which is currently named the Shanghai Academy of Fine Arts (previously called the Shanghai Academy of Chinese Painting Fine Arts). Lin Feng, Xu Beihong and Liu Haisu played with the contours of "national" art forms, featuring fluidity of lines in ink and brush paintings with a Western perspective.

Xu Beihong was invited by T'ien in 1927 to open a department of fine arts, which was later known as the National Central University. Xu Beihong, being an academic painter due to his training in Paris, painted Chinese historical subjects with a style similar to that of Meissonier and Jerome. Soon, however, he developed a technique with Chinese characteristics, which was both realistic and calligraphic. His works incorporate bold calligraphic brush strokes with realistic delineation of form. This can be clearly observed in his horse series paintings of 1930s and 1940s (fig. 1.4 and 1.5).

²⁸ Yen Wen-liang in Soochow, Hsu Pei-hung in Nanking and later Peking, Lin Feng-mien in Hangchow. Lin Feng-mien's school later became, with that in Peking, one of the two national art academies and the centre of the most progressive art movements in China.



1.4 Xu Beihong. 1940. *Group of Horses*. Ink and colour on paper. 109.5 x 121.5 cm. Xu Beihong Memorial Museum, Beijing.



1.5 Xu Beihong. 1942. *Six Galloping Horses*. Ink and colour on paper. 95.5 x 180 cm. Xu Beihong Memorial Museum, Beijing.

His other works include the depiction of historical events. His painting, *The Foolish Old Man Removing the Mountain* (fig 1.6) was perceived as a parable of communal power which can achieve any difficult goal. Mao ensued that this painting should be read as “socialist icon”.

The painting recounts the fable of an old man who remains resolute to remove the mountain in front of his house despite the ridicule received from his neighbours. Xu lines up a group of herculean males heading the operation whereas the old “foolish man” is in the background engaged in a conversation with a female. Xu’s experimentation with realism is rooted in Chinese philosophy where visual realism (*xingsi*) means to achieve spiritual likeness (*shensi*). The artist’s goal was *yixing xieshen* which translates as “using the form to portray the spirit”.



1.6 Xu Beihong. *The Foolish Old Man Removes the Mountains*. 1940. Ink and color on paper. 143.5 x 424 cm. Xu Beihong Memorial Museum, Beijing.

This, when seen in light of Chinese classics from the Tang dynasty, where the role of artist is to

Reach out to imitate the universe,
(and) turn within to discover his own mind (Fong 1993: 291)

gives us a complete view of Realism in China where there is representation of nature with an element of the artist's interior expressiveness; realistic style of painting with moralistic overtones.

The entanglement of “tradition” with “new” is visible through his paintings where the subject matter is a historical Chinese narrative and the central figure is an old man. His historical paintings, *Tian Heng and Five Hundred Followers* (fig 1.7), *Horse Judge*, *Awaiting the Deliverer* (fig 1.8), and *The Foolish Old Man Removing the Mountain*, consist of a central character as the embodiment of the nation. Instead of using a young icon like Marianne as a symbol of the nation (in this case, France) in Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People*, Xu chooses to glorify historical narratives and aged “wise” men meant to depict self-sacrifice, endurance and morality (Fong 1993: 35).



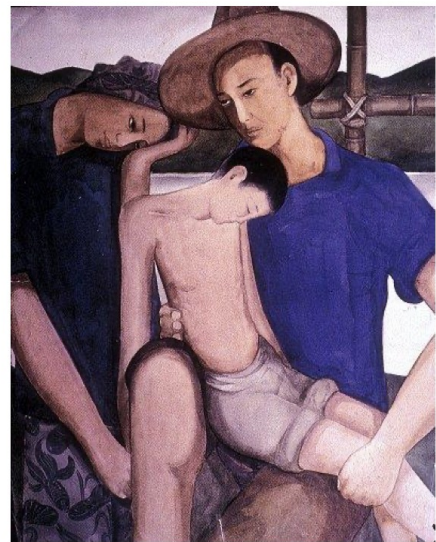
1.7 Xu Beihong. *Tian Heng and Five Hundred Followers*. 1928-1930. Oil on canvas. 197 x 349 cm.
Xu Beihong Memorial Museum, Beijing.

This is in stark contrast to the works of Lin Fengmian and Pang Xunqin, Modernist artists who found their expression in the issues of their epoch through the depiction of young figures. Pang Xunqin's *Son of the Earth* (fig 1.9) portrays the agony of a young couple who lost their son during the Jiangnan drought in 1934. Lin Fengmian's *The Pain of Humanity* portrays misery through nude, distorted human bodies. Although the Impressionist influence is evident through the painting, this Modernist influence was limited to the stylistic aspects.

The First National Art Exhibition of 1929²⁹ played an indispensable role in this discourse on modernisation. The exhibition consisted of artists who had studied at both Tokyo and Paris. It opened up a debate about the structure of modernity in China. Artists like Xu and Li Yishi, ardent supporters of Realism, were met with fierce resistance by the champions of artistic freedom, like Xu Zhimo, Lin Fengmian and Liu Haisu, who supported a plethora of styles from Impressionism to Cubism. Goodman (2012: 171) labels the latter as supporters of Modernism or Avant-Garde. The debate later ended with the undisputed supremacy of Realism.



1.8 Xu Beihong. *Awaiting the Deliverer*. 1930-1933. Oil on canvas. 230 x 318 cm. Xu Beihong Memorial Museum, Beijing.



1.9 Pang Xunqin. *Son of the Earth*. 1934. Watercolor. 73 x 45 cm. Pang Xunqin Memorial Museum, Changshu.

²⁹ The primary role of the exhibition was to present a varied range of art styles.

3.2 Socialist Realism

Lu Xun's "Woodcut Movement" of the 1930s is considered as a parallel art movement with Modernism and Realism. The style depicted the suffering of people and is characterised by strong fighting spirit. In contrast to Modernism, the Woodcut Movement was full of the "spirit of engagement with the world". This movement introduced German Expressionism and Soviet Socialist Realism, paving the way for Expressionist aesthetics.

In the following decades, the influence of Soviet art increased dramatically. It was also the time when art leaders, primarily from the East China campus of CAFA, visited Moscow. Amongst them were Yan Han, with his cohorts Jiang Feng and Cai Ruohong, who spent considerable time in the USSR during 1954. During the same time, many academically trained artists³⁰ were chosen to enrol in the six-year course at Repin Art Academy in Leningrad. These artists were mostly from the families of soldiers, workers and peasants, and had an impeccable record of allegiance to the Party (Andrews 1994: 151).

The training of these Chinese artists in the USSR transformed the Chinese oil painting scene of the 1950s. The administrators of the art field, on returning back, produced extensive reports on things learnt in the host nation. The first batch included professors from CAFA like Luo Gongliu and his colleague Wu Biduan, who, upon completing a special three years in Repin Academy, returned with books that served as a repository for students eager to adopt the Western style. These imported books included Realist works of the Tsarist era, like *Peredvizhniki* or "The Wanderers"³¹ (Sullivan 1996: 135). Amongst them, Ilya Repin and Vasili Surikov were among the most endorsed artists in the PRC. Repin was applauded for being a "people's artist", and Surikov was referred to as an artistic genius in the realm of

³⁰ Among the students who were sent to the Repin Art Academy were, in the first group, Li Tianxiang, a 1950 graduate of CAFA, and Chen Zunsan, of Liaoning. The 1954 group included Lin Gang, a young professor at CAFA, and two artists from CAFA's East China campus, Quan Shanshi and Xiao Feng. In 1955 Deng Shu, who had attained considerable recognition for her *nianhua* in the early 1950s, was dispatched. Li Jun, a young teacher at Beijing Normal University, went to Leningrad as part of the last group, in 1956. Citation please

³¹ In 1870, a group of artists formed The Society for Traveling Exhibitions (*Obshchestvo peredvizhnykh vystavok*), and became known as the *Peredvizhniki* (The Wanderers or Itinerants, in English). This society had as its goals not only to create art that presented an unvarnished representation of contemporary life in Russia, but also to bring art out of the capitals and into the countryside — to the people — to create an art for the nation.

Realism (Hung 2007: 788). For the depiction of the revolutionary aspect of work, Neoclassical painter, Jacques David, achieved wide acclaim for the portrayal of political events of the French Revolution.

It is ironic that although Socialist Realism replaced the literati style of painting, the tradition of imitation (*chuanyimuhsieh*), one of six cannons of Chinese painting, which served as a foundation in literati style, continued as part of the curriculum.

This avid recognition of the Socialist Realist style led to an invitation to the Soviet art educator Konstantin M. Maksimov to teach oil painting at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing in 1955. The students selected for this course, around twenty in number, were chosen bearing in mind the geographical diversity, and academic and vocational balance. It was an amalgamation of artists from national art academies³² to those having a background in publishing houses³³. Apart from this, cohorts from the People's Liberation Army³⁴ were selected as well. The course, organised by the Ministry of Culture in collaboration with CAFA, lasted for two years and provided a postgraduate degree.

In the class, the study of artworks was not limited to Russian artists (Carroll 2016: 132). This was perhaps the reason why the focus areas in teaching methods had glaring similarities with the European academic oil painting training. These areas were producing myriad compositional styles, by exploring the interaction of light with space and form, with European verisimilitude in draughtsmanship and techniques.

³² The list is taken from the book *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China (1949-1979)* by Julia Andrews. JinShangyi, Hou Yimin, Feng Fasi, Zhang Wenxin, and Shang Husheng were selected from CAFA. Others included Ren Mengzhang, from the Lu Xun Academy of Arts in Shenyang; Wang Xuzhu and Yuan Hao, from the academy in Wuhan; Wei Chuanyi, from the academy in Sichuan; Zhan Beixin, from the academy in Xi'an; Lu Guoying, from the Nanjing College of Arts.

³³ Gao Hong and He Kongde belonged to PLA.

³⁴ Wu Dezu, from the People's Art Press Creation Studio in Beijing; and Qin Zheng, from Tianjin. Yu Yunjie, who worked at a publishing firm in Shanghai, was added as a special student in 1956, the only representative of his city.

I would like to cite some examples of how the above-mentioned qualities were articulated in the artworks of the students. The two works of Hou Yimin that have been considered, *Underground Worker* (fig. 1.9), 1957 and *Chairman Mao with Anyuan Mine Workers*, (fig. 1.10) date unknown, are paintings drawn after gaining real life experience in the mines.



1.10 Hou Yimin. 1957. *Underground Worker*. Oil on canvas. Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing.



1.11 Hou Yimin. ND. *Chairman Mao with Anyuan Mine Workers*. Oil on canvas. The National Art Museum of China.

Workers are the major pillar in Marxist theory. Their famous insurrection overthrew the provincial government from Petrograd. Soviet paintings, therefore, incarnate ‘awakening of class consciousness’ in paintings like *In an Old Urals Factory* by Boris Ioganson, which compels the viewer to crucially reflect on it, bearing in mind its political context (Hung 2007: 808). Though Soviet artworks reflected the tension between the two classes, Chinese artworks, although extensively influenced by the Soviets, depicted more of the awakening moment.

These two artworks are based on real life events. The *Underground Worker* depicts a group of young people printing propaganda work before the Liberation. The central figure (young Hou himself) is seen instructing a lady in front of him, whereas the figure in the background is writing matter for the posters, and the figure in front (Zhou Sicong) is printing them. This incident is based on his early life (1948), when Hou, as the head of an underground party at Beijing Art School, was responsible for organising a group for academy teachers and

students and producing handbills. These propaganda posters were printed in *Xinminbao* and were distributed after the Nationalists surrendered (Andrews 1994: 88). This painting served as a precedent for a series of historical paintings, including *Anyuan Mine*, which he painted during his later years.

The process, exemplified by the portrayal of hope and unity in the faces of the workers, is apparent in the painting. As the CPC decided to launch a trade union to fight against the unjust working system, Mao visited the workers in the mines to direct their fight against the oppressors. The second painting is also based on a real-life event.

In both these paintings, the central figure, highlighted through the interplay of light and shade, is engaged in action, which was a new characteristic of paintings of the PRC. In addition to this, Mao is highlighted in the painting by his posture and the aura around him, whereas people in the foreground are looking up at him, and workers in front of him are listening intently to what he has to say. Both the compositions have a similar depiction of the central figure, where the figure is situated in the middle ground. The mathematical spatial mapping is evident in the depiction of Mao, who is placed towards the left side of the painting. The illuminated face of the central figures and the dullness of edges towards the painting leads the painting to be perceived as a square format work instead of the rectangular frame it occupies.

A high level of draughtsmanship is visible in Hou's depiction of workers in *Chairman Mao with Anyuan Mine Workers*. Contrasted to his earlier painting, the spontaneous brushstrokes, a characteristic of traditional Chinese painting, have been replaced by a realistic portrayal of the naked, frail and bent body of the workers. This aspect, shown in multiple ways, is also brought forth by the amputated arm of a worker in front of Mao, with the arm resting on an agricultural tool.



1.12 Zhan Jianjun. *Starting Out*. 1957. Oil on canvas. 140 x 348 cm. Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing.

The colour palette is limited in the above two paintings due to the light source. However, a diverse exploration of the interaction of light with space can be seen in the artworks of other students like Jianjun Zhan. His graduation painting, *Starting Out*, in 1957, handles outdoor lighting effectively. The painting depicts a group of young workers in the Great Northern Wasteland preparing the land for cultivation despite the harsh weather conditions. This painting was, too, backed by personal experience. Zhan, moved by the heroic spirit of these workers, spent time with them at Beijing Youth Wasteland Reclamation Base. It is painted mostly in warm colours, however, the occasional use of cool colours is equitably distributed throughout the painting, be it the foreground, middle-ground or background. This artwork also won a bronze medal in an international art exhibition named the World Youth Gathering.

Based on a real-life event, *The Five Heroes of Mount Langya* (fig. 1.12) depicts five muscular men on mountain peak. These five courageous Chinese soldiers fought against Japanese troops on the top of Mount Langya in 1941. They inflicted great damage to the Japanese troops until they ran out of ammunition. Refusing to surrender, they jumped off the cliff, out of which only two survived.



1.13 Zhan Jianjun. *The Five Heroes of Mount Langya*. 1959. Oil on canvas. 200 cm × 185 cm. Museum of Chinese Revolutionary History, Beijing

Zhan interviewed these two survivors for historical accuracy and to aptly embody the collective spirit of sacrifice. After finishing the painting, Zhan explained the reason behind showing five soldiers with guns atop a cliff instead of combat scene, “to create a memorable effect I wanted to capture the soldiers' indomitable spirit just before their sacrifice”. The human pyramid shape shows the artist’s interest in geometric form, an element visible in his other works as well. This pyramidal structure, according to Zhan, was meant “to create the effect of a monument”. Zhan’s efforts were applauded by the art critic Zu Di, who commented that “the soldiers appear not to be standing on the top of a hill but to be growing out of it” (Hung 2007: 805).

The broad flat strokes and exaggerated poses, a characteristic of all Russian-trained artists, are based on Soviet Socialist Realism and romantic landscapes of *gouhua* artists. The group of five men standing atop a mountain form a sculptural unit the silhouette of which is similar to a receding mountain range in the background.

This Soviet influence in oil painting is visible in the paintings between late 1950s to mid-1960s where the Central Academy of Fine Arts served as a laboratory for experimentation with this art form. The career trajectories of these students, upon completion of the course,

remained similar to the artists who returned to the PRC after travelling extensively across Europe, predominantly France. Upon returning, they assumed relevant positions to disseminate the teachings from their classes. Notes taken during these classes and the progress of the students were published by the Party in the Central Academy's journal, *Meishu yanjiu* and the national art journal, *Meishu* (Andrews 1994: 152). Their works were displayed in prominent national exhibitions and some of the paintings were reproduced extensively in the form of posters.

3.3 1942-1979: Transformation into Mao's "Revolutionary Realism"

I have focused on a timeline starting from 1942, to stress upon the importance of the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art, where, in contrast to the paintings mentioned above, artworks of this model strictly adhered to the political agenda of the government. In addition to this, the subject matter is directed by the government and folk elements are also incorporated in the artworks. Dong's painting of the *Founding Ceremony* exemplifies this through the use of bright colours and decorative patterns, employed specifically in *nianhua* prints. The PRC favoured this nationalist fervour after the decline of Sino-Soviet relations, and it separates this style from the earlier discussed Soviet model. The CPC majorly commissioned revolutionary themes and artworks of historical importance. The deification of the homeland, however, was not one of the themes in this genre due to the PRC's history of moving away from literati painting, where landscapes were a common genre.

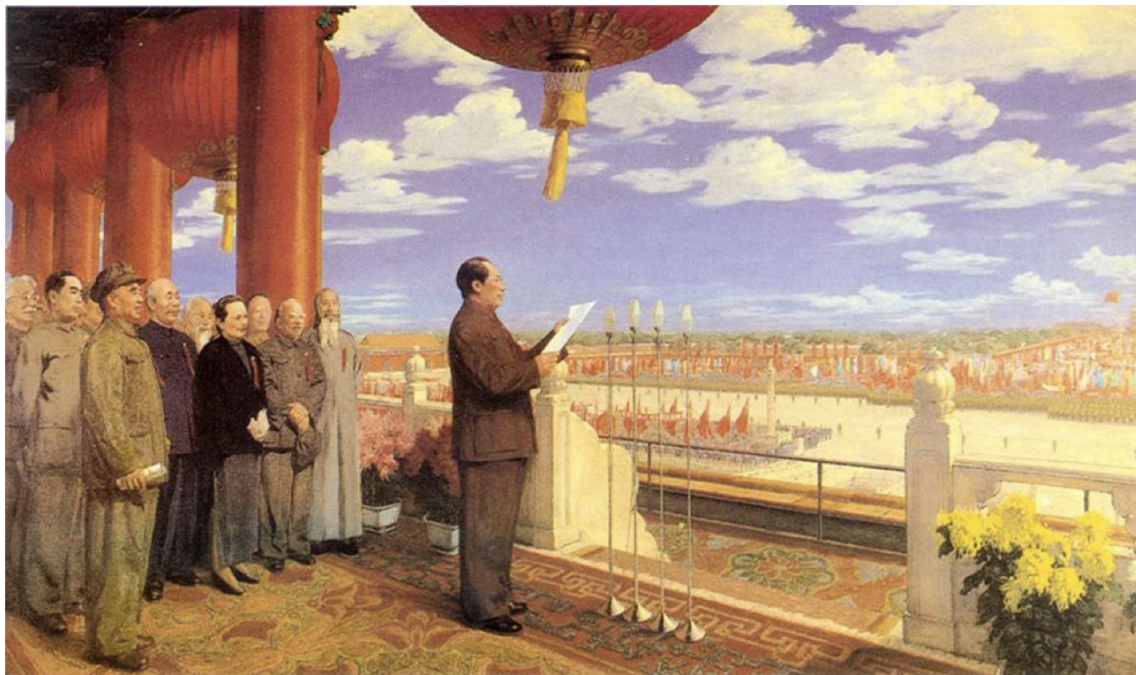
Nationalisation (*minzuhua*) is "tantamount for popularisation" according to Zhou Enlai, which falls in line with Mao's school of thought that art should serve the masses (Hung 2007: 813). Since art is meant to serve and "entertain" the masses, works of art were produced as posters, banners, and arm bands in order to make art easily accessible and omnipresent.

The iconography changed during the Cultural Revolution, where Mao's wife Jiang Qing dictated the guidelines for artworks. Although rendered with the same Realist draughtsmanship, the subject matter was altered to the depiction of the heroism of the army and farmers, accompanied with Jiang's "red, bright, and shining" aesthetics, meant to induce revolutionary fervour in the masses. This led to borrowing stylistic elements from the New

Year paintings (*nianhua*). Since *nianhua* paintings were festive in nature, it was argued that incorporating them could help extol the triumph of the Revolution.

“Maoist sublime” comes into play at this juncture where the works of art exude an overwhelming intensity and power of life crushing nature” (Wang 2004: 238). This further leads to emotional transformations in viewers and purification in artists, quintessential for political idealism achieved during this Revolution.

Dong Xiwen’s *The Grand Ceremony of the Founding of the People’s Republic of China*, 1953, (fig. 1.14) demonstrates the above mentioned qualities in a vivid style. Depicting the establishment of the PRC in Tiananmen Square, the central figure (Mao) stands on a raised stage, surrounded by party officials on the left and cheering crowds with flags at a distance, on the right. The space between the central figure and officials enhances the aura of Mao. The banality of the lantern flying in his direction adds to the visual trope. On a symbolic level, his authority is illustrated by making him face the Zhengyang Gate, which functioned as a main entry point for the Imperial Palace.



1.14 Dong Xiwen. *The Founding Ceremony of the Nation*. ca. 1967. Oil on canvas. 230 × 405 cm. National Museum of China, Beijing.

The sublimity is exhibited by the colour red used in lanterns, carpet, and columns. In the background, the city walls are, too, painted red, adding to the festive atmosphere. The blue colour of the sky, in sharp contrast with the warm colours, is a characteristic borrowed from the folk art terminology.

Dong explained his selection of colours in 1953 as “the Chinese people like bright, intense colours. This convention is in line with the theme of *The Founding Ceremony of the Nation*. In my choice of colors I did not hesitate to put aside the complex colors commonly adopted in Western painting as well as the conventional rules for oil painting. If this painting is rich in national styles,” he continued, “it is largely because I adopted these [native] approaches” (Hung 2007: 809).

A vast expanse of the sky is represented in the background, uninterrupted by the red columns on the right of Mao, which, if compared to the original photograph of Tiananmen Square, is missing in the painting, depicting the creative liberty exercised by the artist.

Although labelled as “pure propaganda” writers by historians, Zhang Shaoxia and Li Xiaoshan were the only historians who appreciated the composition and the colour palette of the painting (Andrews 1994: 80). Xu, however, categorised the colour scheme, under the subheading of a poster, not a painting. Nevertheless, the painting was a mammoth success, as Mao personally endorsed it. The success can partially be attributed to its sponsorship too since a nationalised museum had commissioned it. It resulted in becoming a template for the new nationalised form of art. A million copies were produced by the Fine Art Publishing House alone, in addition to it being published in school textbooks. However, it was seen as more of a development in *nianhùà*, as subsequently, it functioned as one of the interior essentials sanctioned by the party (Andrews 1994: 80).

This painting became ubiquitous in the PRC, which led to a series of changes according to changing demands from the party. First, the artist was asked to eliminate Gao Gang, the figure in a blue suit on the extreme right, which was occupied by the surrounding background, flowers and cityscape. Later, in 1972, it was decided that Liu Shaoqi's presence

would be erased as well for what was perceived as his “right wing” views. Since Liu’s figure was in the middle of a horde of party officials, his face was replaced with the person behind him. Fairly nearing the exhibition, another change was ordered, for Lin Boqu, the secretary-general, depicted on the far left of the group, had been removed from his position. With the deteriorating health of the artist, his student, Jin Shangyi, took over and offered to make a replica of the painting with the suggested changes (fig. 1.15). Both the paintings form a part of the permanent collection in the National Museum of China.

In conclusion, a comprehensive analysis of Dong Xiwen's *The Founding Ceremony of the Nation* reveals its significance beyond mere propaganda. By examining its formal elements and aesthetic qualities, we gain a deeper understanding of the artist's deliberate choices and the visual impact of the composition. This artwork exemplifies the intricate interplay between politics, art, and cultural identity, underscoring the need for nuanced scholarly investigations into its multifaceted nature.



1.15 Reproduction by Jin Shangyi, Zhao Yu, and Yan Zhenduo of Dong Xiwen. *The Founding Ceremony of the Nation*. ca. 1979. Oil on canvas. 230 × 405 cm. National Museum of China (formerly Museum of the Chinese Revolution), Beijing.

4. Conclusion

As mentioned in the introduction, this research contributes to a growing scholarship in reassessing Chinese posters, thereby giving varied perspectives on these artefacts. As Evans and Donald (1999) aptly point out, separating the political content from the aesthetic form poses a fundamental challenge when considering the intersection of art and politics.

Taking the aforementioned into account, the study has contested the pejorative term propaganda and has suggested employing its Chinese counterpart *xuānchuán* as a frame of reference. The exploration of multiple meanings and cultural roots of *xuānchuán* enabled me to provide a nuanced perspective in viewing these artefacts beyond their political content. Since *xuānchuán* has multiple meanings, the paper expands on the second meaning, “to explain something to someone, or to conduct education”, achieved by delving into two important speeches, the Soviet Writers Congress in Moscow in 1934 and Mao’s address at Yan’an Forum on Art and Literature in PRC.

These two speeches delineate the principles and the addressed issues faced by artists in the content of artworks. Both the speeches, read and analysed together, bring forth the similarities and points of departure between the Soviet model and the Chinese model of Socialist Realism. A close reading of the texts bring forth the phrase “reality in revolutionary development”, which in conjunction with Mao’s idea of continuous revolution functioned as a point of departure in the Chinese variant of Socialist Realism. As discussed later in this research, “revolutionary romanticism”, when combined with “revolutionary realism”, resulted in a utopian space where the historical telos is manifested by displaying the completion of ongoing socio-economic and ideological construction.

This analysis enabled me to provide a comprehensive social, historical and comparative dimension to understand the conceptual foundations of art policies of the Communist Party of China. In order to delve deeper into the ways Socialist Realism theory travelled in the PRC, the second part of this paper investigated how the theory was brought into practise by the artists and provided a general overview of developments in art after 1949, and the foreign influence in art styles which later led to the development of the Chinese local axiom. This is

achieved by employing the framework of John Clark where instead of viewing a theory as a completely external phenomenon, I have been able to delineate how the local conditions shaped the theory specific to local concerns. It has also facilitated a departure from the traditional understanding of Chinese art, moving beyond the confines of a monolithic Marxist-Leninist ideology and transcending the constraints of cultural hegemony. This methodology explored the interaction of artists and artworks between culturally exogenous and endogenous sites, drawing forth on the migration patterns of artists and educators and their impact on the development of Chinese art. It not only traces the evolution of Socialist Realism in the PRC, but also analyses its main areas of concern, traversing beyond totalitarianism as a frame of reference.

Furthermore, this methodology enabled me to articulate China's massive cultural and aesthetic transitions which were marked by the rejection of the existing system and the adoption or adaptation of a new one. These transitions in this intermediate zone of adaptation have engendered a unique form of Chinese art intertwined with its cultural dialect. Therefore, Chinese art during the given epoch, which is often viewed as an extension of Soviet-style art, it has been posited, was actually an attempt to develop their own nationalised art form.

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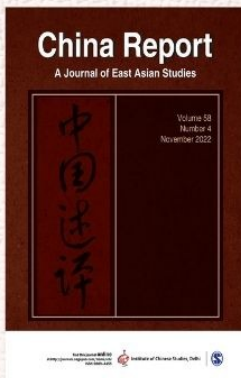


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