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## Field and Factory: Chinese Revolutionary Posters

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## Field and Factory: Chinese Revolutionary Posters

### Description

The images on display for Field and Factory, political propaganda used by the Communist Party of China during the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, construct a fictitious world. In perceiving these kinds of illustrations, the audience is asked either to visualize the society in its ideal form or unify in opposition to a national enemy. In the first half of the twentieth century, before the possibilities of the television advertisement were fully realized, posters were one of the most popular forms of propaganda: cheap to produce in mass quantities and simple enough to hang in any public building. The art form's bold aesthetics encouraged mass mobilization during intense periods of war and political upheaval. The posters in this exhibition represent a myriad of political agendas promoted by the Communist Party of China during its early development after the formation of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Posters were viewed by all citizens in both the private and public sphere; by abolishing other varieties of personal expression, the Communist Party sought control of its population. Whether the posters were sought after as decoration in the home or transmitters of political policy, they became, by default, the most popular form of imagery in China during that time. By glorifying certain aspects of Chinese life, these images help to shape the elements of national identity for a newly founded modern China. [excerpt]

### Keywords

Chinese Revolutionary Posters, Communist Party, political propaganda, People's Republic of China, national identity

### Disciplines

Asian Art and Architecture | Asian History | Chinese Studies | Cultural History | History | History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology | Political History

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### Comments

*Field and Factory: Chinese Revolutionary Posters* was on exhibition at the Schmucker Art Gallery at Gettysburg College, November 1 - December 6, 2013.



# FIELD AND FACTORY: CHINESE REVOLUTIONARY POSTERS



**FIELD AND FACTORY:**  
**CHINESE REVOLUTIONARY POSTERS**



FIGURE 1

*The American aggressor is doomed to be defeated*

Embedded text: "The Soviet army annihilated more than 12,000,000 troops of fascist Germany, Japan, and their alliances during World War II. From 1946 to 1952 the PLA already annihilated more than 8,000,000 troops of Chiang Jieshi (Chiang Kai-shek)'s antirevolutionary army that were armed by American Imperialists."

Early 1950s

29 in. x 20.5 in.

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# FIELD AND FACTORY: CHINESE REVOLUTIONARY POSTERS

## CURATED BY MOLLY REYNOLDS '14

The images on display for *Field and Factory*, political propaganda used by the Communist Party of China during the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, construct a fictitious world. In perceiving these kinds of illustrations, the audience is asked either to visualize the society in its ideal form or unify in opposition to a national enemy. In the first half of the twentieth century, before the possibilities of the television advertisement were fully realized, posters were one of the most popular forms of propaganda: cheap to produce in mass quantities and simple enough to hang in any public building. The art form's bold aesthetics encouraged mass mobilization during intense periods of war and political upheaval. The posters in this exhibition represent a myriad of political agendas promoted by the Communist Party of China during its early development after the formation of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Posters were viewed by all citizens in both the private and public sphere; by abolishing other varieties of personal expression, the Communist Party sought control of its population. Whether the posters were sought after as decoration in the home or transmitters of political policy, they became, by default, the most popular form of imagery in China during that time. By glorifying certain aspects of Chinese life, these images help to shape the elements of national identity for a newly founded modern China.

It is important to realize the extreme transformation that occurred in Chinese politics in the early twentieth century to understand the desire for a modern identity. Because of recurring mass civil unrest, the Xuantong emperor abdicated in 1912, ending the two hundred and sixty eight year rule of the Qing dynasty. Civil war broke out in the late 1920s, interrupted only by the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945). The Communist Party defeated the Nationalist party, led by Chiang Kai-shek, and took control of mainland China. In 1949, Communist Party Chairman Mao Zedong (1893-1976) proclaimed the establishment of the People's Republic of China. It is not surprising that Communism was so attractive to the Chinese people, when the past century had left them completely disillusioned and exhausted by imperial mismanagement and the aggression of Western powers. Citizens were eager to modernize and thereby compete in a global context, yet objected to the republican principles of the West, which to the Chinese psyche portended imperialist tyranny. Mao's ideology was derivative of Joseph Stalin's theory of "Socialism in One Country;" this belief justified mandatory industrialization with a centrally planned economy and the collectivization of agriculture.<sup>1</sup> Mao found these ideas especially relevant for the predominantly agrarian society of China. The nation needed a new direction, and the path was laid by Mao.



**全世界无产阶级联合起来**





# 打倒美帝国主义

北京市工艺美术院革委会制

FIGURE 2

*The Proletarian Classes of the World Unite and Overthrow American Imperialism*

Designed by The Revolutionary Committee of The Beijing Fine Arts Academy

1960s

21.25 in. x 29.25 in.

Special Collections/  
Musselman Library,  
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During the Korean War (1950-1953), the Chinese government supported North Korea in its struggle to create a communist state and viewed this change as a liberation from Western coercion. Two of the posters exhibited reflect this idea of Communism as a model for combatting capitalism (figures 1 and 2): in *The American Aggressor is Doomed to be Defeated*, a Russian and Chinese soldier loom over caricatures of their enemies. The books open to pages promoting the number of German, Japanese, and Nationalist troops killed by the two Communist armies. The government felt a need to bring the Chinese people together under the infant Communist system, and nothing is more unifying than a common enemy. In another woodblock poster, *The Proletarian Classes of the World Unite and Overthrow American Imperialism*, Mao's face shines in a red sun, while people of the world crowd in anger. This anti-American campaigning was extremely common during the Korean War, as the United States became a central world power during World War II and its aftermath.

A popular motif in propaganda was the economic well-being of the country, which was to be the measure of success in modernization.<sup>2</sup> The Great Leap Forward (1958-1961), a period of coerced, rapid change, introduced mandatory farming collectivization and rural industrialization. The mountain village of Dazhai, successful due to the inhabitants' self-reliance and use of farming technology, is used as a paradigm of agrarian achievement (figure 3). In the poster, *Learn from Dazhai in Agriculture*, the mountains are depicted in the style of traditional landscape painting, while the terrific height of an electricity power tower signifies modernization on the horizon. Persimmons and peaches, symbols of abundance and fortune, frame the happy farming family. The clothing of each figure is typical of this period; the daughters wear simple shirts, and one sports a neck towel, used to wipe sweat away in the heat. Fashions of this time did not have much variation, and popular clothing was extremely utilitarian. In a twin poster, *Learn from Daqing in industry* (figure 4), Daqing, the site of the first oilfield in China, serves as a model for Chinese industry. The image itself displays a skillful composition and use of color. The men are happy in this depiction and their twisting, thick figures evoke power and energy. Their balanced, skilled movement is a physical expression of the strength of Daqing's industry. In Maoist ideology, soldiers, farmers, and workers formed the honorable pillars of society, and illustrations of their work reflected this idea.



**FIGURE 3**  
*Learn from Dazhai in agriculture*  
 Late 1960s  
 30 in. x 20.5 in.  
 Special Collections/  
 Musselman Library,  
 Purchase of Friends of  
 Musselman Library



**FIGURE 4**  
*Learn from Daqing in industry*  
 Late 1960s  
 20.75 in. x 29 in.  
 Special Collections/  
 Musselman Library,  
 Purchase of Friends of  
 Musselman Library

The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) was a result of Chairman Mao's struggle for supremacy within the Communist Party. At this time, the leader promoted a perpetual youth revolution that would unseat elite culture. The youth were organized into the Red Guard and were encouraged to destroy, in the words of art historian Maria Galikowski, "the products of feudalism and revisionism," and instead spread Revolutionary visions.<sup>3</sup> Intellectuals were persecuted as enemies of the state; many artists were beaten and their studios looted as the movement reached a height of hysteria.<sup>4</sup> Party leadership promised the introduction of, as cultural historian Richard King writes, "a new proletarian culture true to a radical interpretation of Mao's vision of the arts," which Mao expressed at Yan'an twenty five years earlier.<sup>5</sup> In 1942, Mao had come to the Communist stronghold of Yan'an in the Shaanxi province for the Conference on Literature and Art, a gathering centered on overthrowing traditional Chinese culture and replacing it with a Communist one. In his closing statement, Mao declared that "Proletarian literature and art are a part of the whole proletarian revolutionary cause; as Lenin said, they are "a screw in the whole machine," and therefore, the party's work in literature and art occupies a definite, assigned position within the party's revolutionary work as a whole."<sup>6</sup>

Mao's philosophy was potent and did not allow for nonconformists. The goals for literary and visual creation dictated at Yan'an were used as the foundation for all proletarian artworks. Therefore, the instructions for propaganda and art-making were handed down from the Cultural Revolution Small Group (an organ of the CPC), and the mandated formal style was very precise. As art historian Julia Andrews has noted, designs were to be "bright, and should be illuminated in such a way as to imply that Mao himself was the primary source of light."<sup>7</sup> Cool colors were avoided, and red was the preferred dominant hue. Already the symbol of revolution and socialism, the "red sun" was an icon of Mao ideology. The new posters often featured woodcut illustrations, watercolor paintings with graphic outlines, and had a strong instructive nature. Many were influenced by Soviet Socialist Realist works, a style that had been appropriated by the Chinese government because of its simultaneous promotion of the value of workers and the wisdom of Communist leadership.<sup>8</sup> Text was a vital part of the design, often a piece of Mao's poetry or an anti-imperialist slogan. Posters were not just produced through groups within the Party, but by Red Guard individuals. Personal posters were often *dazibao*, or character posters, whereas the illustrated posters like those in this exhibition were typical of "commercial" artwork (figure 5).<sup>9</sup> Proletarian images were the only acceptable decoration in homes and for the public eye. The great paradox of the Cultural Revolution was that its ideology was one of an enlightenment movement, even while demanding the total obliteration of Chinese art and culture, the product of thousands of years of civilization.

**FIGURE 5**

*All Reactionary Forces are Paper Tigers*

Extract from Mao's  
"Talk with the American  
Correspondent Anna  
Louise Strong" (1946)

"All reactionaries  
are paper tigers.  
In appearance, the  
reactionaries are  
terrifying, but in reality,  
they are not so powerful.  
From a long-term point  
of view, it is not the  
reactionaries but the  
people who are powerful."

Late 1960s

30 in. x 21.25 in

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一切反动派都是纸老虎



**FIGURE 6**

*Advance victoriously while following Chairman Mao's revolutionary line in literature and the arts, Comrade Jiang Qing*

Designed by the Revolutionary Committee of the Beijing Arts Academy  
October 1972

29.25 in. x 20 in.

Special Collections/  
Musselman Library,  
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**FIGURE 7**

*At the time of commemorating the publication of Chairman Mao's "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art"*

25 years ago, 8 revolutionary model operas are performed in Beijing: *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy*, *On the Docks*, *The Legend of the Red Lamp*, *Shajia Village*, *Raid on the White Tiger Regiment*, *The Red Detachment of Women*, *The White-Haired Girl*, and *Ode to Longjiang*

1967

21.25 in. x 27.75 in.

Special Collections/  
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Jiang Qing (1914-1991), Mao's last wife, was considered the standard-bearer of the Cultural Revolution. She is depicted in a woodcut illustration surrounded by tableaux from the operas and ballets she developed as the revolutionary model theatrical works (*geming yangbanxi*), historic tales of revolutionary heroes that were performed throughout China (figure 6). She reaches outward with one hand, extolling the values expressed in *Quotations From Chairman Mao* that she grasps in her left hand. Jiang wished to draw a parallel between Mao's ideals and her own work, as she planned her ascension to power after her husband's death. Both leaders' faces look in the same direction, guiding the people toward an ideal China. Another poster (figure 7), celebrating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Yan'an talks in 1967, presents important scenes from one of these model operas, *Ode to Longjiang*. The heroine of the tale, the Party Branch Committee Secretary of the Longjian commune, sacrifices her own crops to ameliorate the conditions of her community, plagued by drought. Her character represents the power of an individual abandoning her own interests for the good of the whole, a virtue central to the success of Communist policy. Because of the notion of gender equality embedded in Communist ideology, women experienced empowerment during this time and were often the subject of these model works and propagandistic imagery.

While "Madame Mao" often figured herself as one of her operas' courageous heroines, she was one of four high-ranking Party officials ousted from power after Mao's death in 1976. Known as the "Gang of Four," they would be put on trial and imprisoned for counter-revolutionary activity. In one illustration (figure 8), the four "thieves" teeter on each other's shoulders, wielding an axe to chop down "the fruit of the cultural revolution," as it states on the red tree. The style of this cartoon identifies the political figures as clowns, characters not to be taken seriously. The gang, once regarded as the most powerful figures in Chinese internal politics, became the target of a fierce propaganda campaign by the Party.

In this exhibition, several posters bear the face of Mao Zedong. The foundation of the Cultural Revolution was one man's omnipotent power, and thus his image was reproduced constantly for public consumption. The reproduction of Mao's likeness was well-monitored and was to be "red, smooth, and luminescent" (*hong, guang, liang*).<sup>10</sup> His image represented the new, longed for Chinese identity. Like any advertisement, the anticipated result of the pictorial inundation was that with greater exposure, citizens would identify with Mao and become more compliant in following his policies. In the more appropriate language of the Yan'an talks, "popular" art that was mass-produced to serve the masses was an integral part of the politicization of a once-bourgeois, elite art form.

In perhaps the most poignant poster of the collection, Mao appears in a field of golden wheat against a clear blue sky (figure 9). The caption describes the leader's tour of inspection in 1958, during the Great Leap Forward. Glorious fields of wheat, however, were not reality for the majority of Chinese; tens of millions starved to death during the CPC's aggressive implementation of industrialization and collectivization in farming. The ideal twentieth-century China was built on policies that were the source of suffering and terror for many citizens, especially in rural areas. The paradoxes and contradictions apparent in artworks from this time emphasize the unresolved issues with this new national identity.<sup>11</sup>

The Maoist imagery formulated during these decades provoke critical revisiting and have been appropriated by artists around the globe. In China, Mao's smooth face has been subverted and deconstructed by contemporary artists including painter Li Shan, whose "Rouge Series" juxtaposes the Chairman's likeness with erotic flowers.<sup>12</sup> Obsessed with ideas of mass production and repetition, pop artist Andy Warhol replicated Mao's face in enormous silkscreen prints in the early 1970s. Mao has become a cultural icon, his portrait the most reproduced in human history.<sup>13</sup> These revolutionary posters, firmly rooted in their original socio-political context but with lasting repercussions in global art, are an enduring part of cultural history not only for China, but for the world.

**FIGURE 8**  
*Four Thieves Steal the Fruit*  
1976  
30.75 in. x 21.25 in.  
Special Collections/  
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文化大革命成果

四贼偷果

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**FIGURE 9**

*The people's communes are good: our Great Leader Chair Mao was on a tour of inspection to the North and South sides of the Great River in the year of 1958 during the Great Leap Forward*

1969

29.5 in. x 20.25 in.

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# 人民公社好

我们的伟大领袖毛主席，在大跃进的一九五八年巡视大江南北。

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# FIELD AND FACTORY: CHINESE REVOLUTIONARY POSTERS

**November 1 – December 6, 2013**

**GALLERY TALK:** November 1, 4pm

**RECEPTION:** November 1, 4:30–6pm

**CURATED BY**

**MOLLY REYNOLDS '14**

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