

THE POLITICAL POSTER AND ITS ROLE IN THE PERSONALITY CULT OF MAO ZEDONG

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In May 2018 Xi Jinping marked the 200th anniversary of Karl Marx's birth with a speech in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing. In it he declared the Chinese Communist Party was "totally correct" to stick to Marx's true path and described the German philosopher as the "greatest thinker of modern times". On the wall behind Xi loomed a giant framed painting of Marx himself. Xi's statement is in line with the shift in recent years toward a partial return to the era of Mao Zedong, and the painting of Marx an explicit reminder of an era of powerful political imagery. The personality cult of Mao Zedong, and the Marxist-Leninist ideology underpinning it, was constructed throughout the twentieth century not least by the proliferation of propaganda posters like the one of Marx. Indeed, images of the great figures of Marxism-Leninism, largely inspired by Soviet examples, have been used consistently for propaganda purposes since the foundation of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and have served as evidence of the legitimacy of power. This short paper presents some of the most influential Chinese propaganda posters of the Mao era and offers some reflections on the role they played in serving state power by creating and sustaining both the Marxist-Leninist ideology and the personality cult of Mao Zedong.

All personality cults use modern technologies to render a subconscious impact, best transmitted through visual propaganda tools. The political poster is one such instrument and indeed was the most important in PRC political propaganda up until the end of the 1990s. Naturally enough, it often reflected the importance of such figures as Karl Marx, Vladimir Lenin, and Joseph Stalin to twentieth-century Chinese political ideology. The most famous example is the *Long Live Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought!* poster (Figure 1), which emerged in the late 1960s and clearly demonstrates Mao Zedong's ambitions to be seen among such figures as a teacher of Marxism on the world's stage. The composition of the poster and its color scheme are fairly simple: the profiles of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, and Mao Zedong in red and white are lined up in a single row. There is no place for the Soviet leaders of the time.

The Marxist doctrine spread through China after the May Fourth Movement in 1919.¹ Mao Zedong first described the Chinese version of Marxism in 1925. In 1936 he gave a series of lectures entitled "Problems of Revolutionary Struggle Strategy in China," where he spoke about the differences between Soviet Russia and China, mentioning the

1 Yang Hingshong 1957, 8.

Chinese version of the doctrine as prevailing, which is the common attitude in present-day China. Later, Mao Zedong substantiated the concept of national identity as an indispensable presence in Marxism forms, which echoes the opinions of the founders of Marxism.²



Fig. 1: Unknown artist. 1968. *Long Live Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought! (Ma Lie zhuyi Mao Zedong sixiang wansui! 马列主义毛泽东思想万岁!)* [Source: Chinese Posters Foundation 2019]

Of course, the images of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin acted as confirmation of Mao Zedong's legitimacy and rightness to rule. His personality cult belongs to modern cults, which differ from monarchist ones in several aspects. First, they cover not the narrow elite stratum but the entire population of a country; second, they are based on modern media capabilities; third, they function only in closed societies; fourth, they appear just in secular states; fifth, they only center around males (monarchical cults often worship females such as queens). The first modern personality cult was probably that of Louis Napoleon Bonaparte, who proclaimed himself Napoleon III.³ Mao Zedong managed to build around himself a much more powerful and large-scale cult than any of the Soviet leaders. He wrote that personality cults are divided into two types: true and false. To the first he attributed the cults of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin,⁴ and, of course, his own, though he did not explicitly say so.

The Chinese political poster developed under the direct influence of socialist realism, the official aesthetic of the PRC and indeed the Soviet bloc. More traditional styles were usually regarded as outdated. Mao Zedong specified this as early as May 1942 in a report to

2 Tsyrendorzhieva and Balchindorzhieva 2013, 261.

3 Plamper 2010, 12–13.

4 Mao Zedong 1969, 162.

the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art. The ideas expressed at this meeting determined the direction of Chinese art for the next four decades. Central among them was the adoption of Soviet artistic styles in a Chinese framework under a campaign with the slogan, "Learning from the USSR". In 1953 Mao Zedong personally appealed to party workers to support this movement,⁵ although arguably they had already been doing so for several years.

The visualization of an ideological myth is one of the most important tasks of totalitarian art.⁶ One of the typical features of Soviet art, and later PRC art, was the sacralization of images symbolizing the state system. The leader's image was central – and still is – to any totalitarian ideology, and from it all spiritual values followed.⁷ In China portraits of Mao Zedong were an essential feature of any work or living space (Figure 2).



Fig. 2: Xie Zhiguang 谢之光, Shao Jingyun 邵靓云, and Xie Mulian 谢幕莲. 1953. *Moving into a New House* (*Banjin xin fangzi* 搬进新房子) [Source: Chinese Posters Foundation 2019]

Not having them put you at risk. Moreover, portraits of Mao required a special place on the wall: no images should hang above them. Often they were put above the door.⁸ Political posters came to replace New Year's prints, or *nianhua* 年画, which were associated with folk religion and had often served as the only decoration in homes and workplaces. A similar transition had occurred in the USSR: after the October Revolution in 1917 the "red corner," in which Orthodox icons were displayed, became a thing of the past, replaced by political imagery.

5 Short 2005, 400.

6 Golomshtok 1994, 177.

7 Ibid., 113.

8 Guffey 2015, 199.

The content as well as the composition and even the color scheme of political posters were directly dependent on current policies, which Mao Zedong personally dictated. For this reason researchers usually have no difficulty in dating Chinese posters: many campaigns were quite short-run.⁹ This is especially true of the Cultural Revolution, when changes in the political narrative came thick and fast. The relationship between fluctuations in the political line and the PRC poster is clearly visible from how Stalin's image changed throughout the years. Mao Zedong deeply respected the Soviet leader and feared the debunking of his own personality cult, as had happened with Stalin after his death in 1953. Among the other figures of Marxism, Chinese artists more frequently chose to only depict the image of Karl Marx.

For many Chinese in the early years of the PRC, the only image they had seen of Stalin was on a political poster. Stalin and Mao occupied equally supreme positions in their respective parties and states from the end of 1949 to the beginning of 1953. During that period many artistic works and much political imagery and iconography reflected the idea of the inviolability of the Soviet-Chinese friendship.¹⁰ On the posters of the time, Stalin, as a rule, was depicted side by side with Mao Zedong, but at the same time the Soviet dictator was shown to be the first among equals. His majestic appearance, as well as the scale of his figure in comparison to other characters, gave him the air of a mentor, with Mao Zedong the devoted student (Figures 3 and 4).



Fig. 3: Li Binghong 黎冰鸿. Ca. 1950. *The Sino-Soviet Alliance for Friendship and Mutual Assistance Promotes Enduring World Peace* (Zhong Su youhao tongmeng huzhu cujin shijie chijiu heping 中苏友好同盟互助促进世界持久和平) [Source: Chinese Posters Foundation 2019]

9 Evans and Donald 1999, 34.

10 Galenovitch 2009, 5.



Fig. 4: Feng Zhen 冯真 and Li Qihe 李奇合. 1951. *Great Meeting (Weidade huijian 伟大的会见)* [Source: Chinese Posters Foundation 2019]

The idea of learning from the USSR (the “Big Brother”) was also conveyed in works depicting ordinary citizens of the two countries (Figure 5).



Fig. 5: Ding Hao 丁浩. 1953. *Study the Soviet Union's Advanced Economy to Build Up Our Nation (Xuexi Sulián xianjin jingji jianshe womende guojia 学习苏联现今经济建设我们的国家)* [Source: Chinese Posters Foundation 2019]

These two visual themes – Stalin as mentor and learning from Big Brother – were clearly adopted from the Soviet Union itself together with socialist realism. Soviet artists created

works with a similar composition and idea: the most popular example is the poster entitled *Let the Unbreakable Friendship and Cooperation of the Soviet and Chinese Peoples Live and Grow Stronger!*,¹¹ which depicts Stalin and Mao shaking hands in front of a red background (Figure 6). It was created by Viktor Ivanov (1909–1968) in 1951. In the poster Mao is leaning forward slightly, while Stalin stands in a more confident but relaxed pose, looking like “a master of the situation.”



Fig. 6: Ivanov, Viktor. 1951. *Let the Unbreakable Friendship and Cooperation of the Soviet and Chinese Peoples Live and Grow Stronger!* (Пусть живет и крепнет нерушимая дружба и сотрудничество советского и китайского народов!) [Source: Plakaty Nagrody 2020]

In 1958 Mao Zedong declared that he was the tallest among the great Marxists, equal to Stalin or even taller. The Chinese leader lamented that in the 1950s the artists of the PRC always depicted him as being shorter than Stalin – as if China was the USSR’s junior partner. The *Great Meeting* by Feng Zhen and Li Qi (Figure 4) is particularly noteworthy in this regard. At first glance, Stalin, walking a little ahead of Mao Zedong, seems to be taller. However, if two figures are placed on the same horizontal line, it becomes clear that Mao Zedong is actually depicted as being taller than the Soviet leader.¹² Mao Zedong, the record

11 Пусть живет и крепнет нерушимая дружба и сотрудничество советского и китайского народов!

12 Jiang Jichong 2007, 48–49.

shows, was probably right about Stalin's height. We know Mao's height – 175 cm – but the exact height of Stalin is currently unclear. At various times and in different sources, though, he is described as anywhere between 167 and 171 cm. The Soviet dictator tried to appear taller, and for this reason he often wore shoes with thick soles and high heels.

The sequence of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, and Mao (depicted in the 1968 poster in Figure 1) was widespread and accepted in the early 1950s, but during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) the Chinese dictator was elevated above the other world proletariat strongmen. The idea of an unbreakable friendship with USSR was abandoned. Mao Zedong frankly disrespected Nikita Khrushchev, who came to power with Stalin's death in 1953. The new Soviet leader saw a friend in Mao and this was taken for a weakness by the Chinese. In what became known as the Sino-Soviet split from 1956 to 1966, the PRC accused the Soviets of revisionism and of watering down the Marxist-Leninist ideology.

It should be noted that the very common image of Mao Zedong as a superman was in fact adopted from the USSR. Traditionally in China it was not customary to iconize the emperor's personal image, and for this reason, up until the twentieth century the Chinese observed only the monumental reflection of the personality cult in the form of Buddhist statues. Between 1953 and 1956 the first group of Chinese young artists came to study in the USSR in order to master the basics of oil painting. Such training began with a reassessment of Western realism in China. Initially, it seemed secondary to local mass genres, which seemed more appropriate to convey communist ideas to the Chinese people.¹³ For the first time a group of art students was sent to the Leningrad Academy of Arts.¹⁴ The artist students were all members of Chinese Communist Party or born to proletarian families. Later most of them played an important role in Chinese realist painting, and also in developing political posters. Among them was Luo Gongliu 罗工柳, (1916–2004), who in 1962 headed Studio 2 of the Central Arts Academy, which was dedicated to realist painting. Another Soviet-taught artist, Xiao Feng 肖锋, (b. 1932) was the rector of the Zhejiang Art Academy from 1983 to 1996 and did a lot for the development of the university. His Leningrad classmate, Jin Shangyi 靳尚谊, (b. 1934), a talented artist, taught many students in the academy. The Leningrad Academy is still popular today among Chinese art students, and there is a Chinese version of its website.

Among the images of Stalin the oil painting *The Morning of Our Motherland* by Fyodor Shurpin (1904–1972), which won the Stalin Prize in 1949, was especially popular (Figure 7).

13 Chang-tai Hong 2011, 130

14 Now the St. Petersburg State Academic Institute of Fine Arts, Sculpture and Architecture, named after the Russian realist painter Ilya Efimovich Repin. See <http://www.artsacademy.ru/> [last accessed: December 1, 2019].



Fig. 7: Shurpin, Fyodor. 1946–1948. *The Morning of Our Motherland* (*Утро нашей Родины*) [Source: Pinterest 2020]

Shurpin's painting Stalin standing in a field lit by the dawn light. He wears a simple white service jacket and seems to be like a superman, towering above the endless expanses of a vast country. A similar compositional solution became very popular in the iconography of Mao Zedong at the height of his cult, as has been noted by the historian Igor Golomshtok in his monograph *Totalitarian Art*.¹⁵ One example is a collective work which depicts Mao Zedong standing on a high mountain above a field of crimson flowers, which reveal themselves as red flags upon closer examination (Figure 8). His relaxed but confident posture and his gaze into the distance and upwards very much resembles Shurpin's Stalin. But, given the distance of the fields below him and the fact that he appears to be even above the clouds, Mao looks much more like a god than a superman.

The iconography of Mao Zedong inherited many features from images of Stalin in Soviet propaganda. The leader was the center of the composition, and this was emphasized by his size, posture, color of clothing, and so forth. Of particular importance was his gaze, directed to a focal point outside the painting. Although this was not a stylistic innovation on the part of the Soviet artists, a new idea was laid within it: the leader's supreme thought leads the society towards a brighter future.¹⁶ During the Cultural Revolution, at the peak of the personality cult of Mao Zedong, his iconography was complemented by features not typical of Soviet socialist realism. In particular there were carefully regulated techniques of painting the leader's face, which should be "red, smooth and luminous,"¹⁷ with finely painted skin. It was forbidden to use cold colors, preference was given to red and its shades, and the Chairman had to be the main source of light. Some of these meth-

15 Golomshtok 1994, 125–126.

16 Plamper 2010, 142.

17 Cushing and Tompkins 2007, 8.

ods came from Chinese folk art. A large number of kitsch, often frankly flattering propaganda posters was created in this manner. Many painters, fearing their work might be out of step with current political criteria, did not sign the pictures or chose instead to mask their identity behind collective names (Figure 9).¹⁸



Fig. 8: Artists of Zhejiang Art Academy (Zheng Shengtian 郑胜天, Zhou Ruiwen 周瑞文, and Xu Junxuan 徐君莹). 1967. *Man's World is Mutable, Seas Become Mulberry Fields: Chairman Mao Inspects the Situation of the Great Proletarian Revolution in Northern, South-Central, and Eastern China* (*Renjian zhengdelao shi cangsang: Mao zhuxi shicha Huabei, Zhongnan he Huadong diqude wuchan jieji wenhua da geming xingshi* 人间正道是沧桑——毛主席视察华北、中中和华东地区的无产阶级文化大革命形势) [Source: Chinese Posters Foundation 2019]



Fig. 9: Shanghai People's Fine Arts Publishing House Propaganda Group 上海人民美术出版社宣传画组. 1966. *The Sunlight of Mao Zedong Thought Illuminates the Road of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution* (*Mao Zedong sixiangde yangguang zhaoliang wuchan jieji wenhua dagemingde daolu* 毛泽东思想的阳光照亮无产阶级文化大革命的道路) [Source: Chinese Posters Foundation 2019]

18 Ibid., 8.

A well-known painting by Liu Chunhua (刘春华, b. 1944) *Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan* (*Mao zhuxi qu Anyuan*, 毛主席去安源, 1968) (Figure 10) also traces parallels with *The Morning of Our Motherland*.

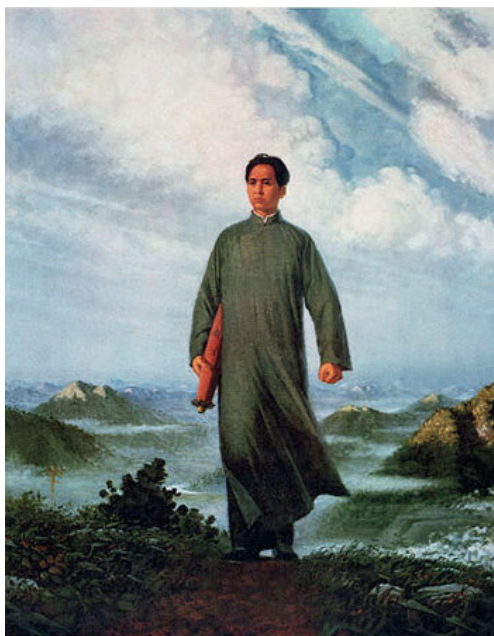


Fig. 10: Liu Chunhua 刘春华. 1968. *Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan* (*Mao zhuxi qu Anyuan*, 毛主席去安源) [Source: Chinese Posters Foundation 2019]

Both paintings are compositionally based on a similar concept, where an idea of a brighter future is shown through the same allegories, which are leader figures, filled with strength, their eyes looking away and slightly upwards,¹⁹ the dawn sky above their heads. There are, of course, some differences. Shurpin depicted Stalin as an aged man, but the young Chinese artist shows his leader as a youngster. Mao Zedong walks through picturesque mountains under a clear morning sky. He is dressed in a traditional Chinese gown worn by intellectuals; his face, clenched fist, and whole demeanor express inflexibility and dedication. His way goes to the city of Anyuan, where he will lead a miners' strike. According to the artist's own words, his inspiration for this painting was *Madonna* by Raphael. *Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan* was extremely popular in China – probably even more than the work of Shurpin in the USSR. It is possible to say that it was a subject of a separate developed cult. According to Liu Chunhua's own estimates, during the Cultural Revolution his work sold out at 900 million copies, which exceeded the entire population of the

19 Plamper 2010, 172.

PRC! The painting was created in 1967 specifically for a major exhibition dedicated to the Anyuan strike of 1922. In fact, it was the disgraced PRC chairman Liu Shaoqi who directed the miners, and this exhibition was one of the measures aimed at expunging his name from official history.²⁰

As historian Maurice Meisner has noted, by 1968 the cult of Mao Zedong had shifted from iconoclasm to icon-making.²¹ Despite its widespread popularity, the *Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan* painting differed in composition from most of the works that depicted the “superman” figure, which were specifically made to be published as posters. Portraits of other prominent Chinese political and public figures also followed this model. Jin Shangyi, one of the Leningrad Academy graduates mentioned earlier and the creator of numerous portraits of Mao Zedong, almost completely borrowed Shurpin’s composition in a portrait of Prime Minister Zhou Enlai in 1977 (Figure 11).



Fig. 11: Jin Shangyi 靳尚谊. 1977. *Spring in River Land* (*Jianghe dadi de chuntian* 江河大地的春天)
[Source: Baidu 2020]

The image of the superman was also used to show the important role of everyday Chinese workers (Figure 12).

There were both nameless, generalized characters (Figure 13), and images of real-life personalities. Undoubtedly the most popular propaganda hero was Lei Feng, a “simple soldier,” who devoted his life to helping other people (Figure 14).²²

²⁰ Andrews 1994, 338.

²¹ Cited in Andrews and Shen 2012, 188.

²² Carducci 2003, 198.



Fig. 12: Qian Daxin 钱大昕. 1965. *Follow the Road of Dazhai* (*Zou Dazhai zhi lu* 走大寨之路) [Source: Chinese Posters Foundation 2019]



Fig. 13: Liang Yunqing 梁运清. 1960. Develop the “Basket on the Back Spirit,” Serve the People Wholeheartedly (Fayang “beilou jingshen” quan xin quan yi wei renmin fuwu 发扬“背篓精神”全心全意为人民服务) [Source: Chinese Posters Foundation 2019]



Fig. 14: A Er 阿二. 1977. *Have Deep Love for Mao Zedong Thought Just Like Comrade Lei Feng* (Xiang Lei Feng tongzhi neiyang re'ai Mao Zedong sixiang 象雷锋同志那样热爱毛泽东思想). Source: Chinese Posters Foundation 2019



Fig. 15: Hejiang Region Literature and Arts Working Group 合江地区文艺工作组. 1971. *Long Live the Paris Commune: Commemorating the 100th anniversary of the Paris Commune* (Bali gongshe wansui: Jimian Bali Gongshe yibai zhounian 巴黎公社万岁: 纪念巴黎公社一百周年) [Source: Chinese Posters Foundation 2019]

Karl Marx was also depicted as a luminary or a higher being floating above the people, but in his iconography, there is no noticeable reverence of political power (Figure 15). The German philosopher features on posters during the period of the Cultural Revolution related to the Paris Commune, the radical socialist and revolutionary government that

ruled Paris for just over two months in 1871 and was considered the example *par excellence* for revolutionary committees²³ – a new form of government, combining party and administrative functions.²⁴

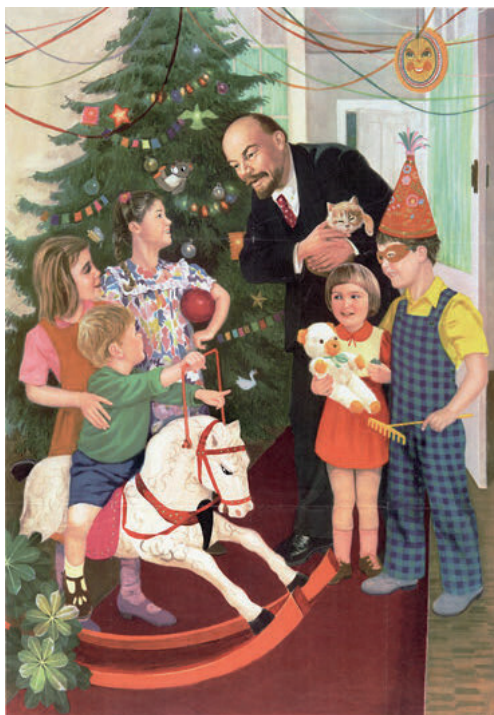


Fig. 16: Ha Qiongwen 哈琼文. 1982. *Lenin Loves Children* (*Liening ai haizi* 列宁爱孩子) [Source: Chinese Posters Foundation 2019]

Chinese artists sometimes depicted scenes from the life of Karl Marx, but more often he appeared in a somewhat abstract form of a portrait – in a frame or as part of a composition. The same is typical for images of Lenin, which were less widespread and which were often used as a model of correct behavior for young people. Such imagery was also clearly influenced by Soviet examples, where, after the end of the cult of Stalin, the image of Lenin served as the main object of adoration. Like Soviet artists, the Chinese generally portrayed Lenin in motion, and the most important part of his image was his head and not the gaze or facial expression. Images of Lenin in visual propaganda continued in China until quite late, and even in the late 1990s his image was involved in an anti-smoking campaign!²⁵ The theme of Lenin as a friend to children, as a wise and caring grandpa, was

23 Cushing and Tompkins 2007, 14.

24 Wang Peijie 2017, 2.

25 Chinese Poster Foundation 2019. See <https://chinese posters.net/themes/lenin.php>.

popular in the Soviet Union²⁶ and did not fail to feature in Chinese poster iconography too (Figure 16). Me, the author of this article, who went to the kindergarten in late 1980s, remember myself singing songs about Lenin when I was a child.



Fig. 17: Sun Guocheng 孙国厚. 1974. *Reporting to Chairman Mao* (*Xiang Mao zhuxi huibao* 向毛主席汇报) [Source: Chinese Posters Foundation 2019]



Fig. 18: Zhejiangsheng gongnongbing meishu chuanguozu 浙江省工农兵美术创作组. 1968. *The Reddest Red Sun in Our Heart, Chairman Mao and Us Together* (*Women xinzhong zuibong zuihongde hong taiyang Mao zhuxi he women xin lianxin* 我们心中最红最红的太阳毛主席和我们心连心) [Source: Chinese Posters Foundation 2019]

Mao Zedong was also portrayed surrounded by children and young people, but whereas Lenin is depicted in such works as ordinary, one of the people, the Great Helmsman is typically presented as a mentor (Figure 17) or an object of mass adoration (especially on posters during the Cultural Revolution) (Figure 18).

As for Friedrich Engels, his image was quite rare, both in Chinese and Soviet political posters.

The twentieth-century Chinese iconography of figures of Marxism-Leninism largely parallels its Soviet equivalent; however, some divergences may be noted. The Chinese posters are characterized by a more emphasized centralization around one (or, less often, several) characters. The significance of the main subjects is accentuated by their place in the composition, the bottom-up angling, the color scheme. In general, Soviet posters look more ascetic, primarily because of a less bright color scheme. Chinese posters have a more kitschy and decorative style, largely inherited from folk art. It is also worth noting that, except those works from the Cultural Revolution era that use black, red, and white and resemble woodblock art, Chinese posters are closer to realist painting than their Soviet counterparts. In Mao's China there were almost no gap between the painting and the poster, whereas in the Soviet Union they generally existed as distinct art forms.

Today, despite predictions to the contrary, China is the last major socialist state left standing, though it has of course adapted its brand of Marxist-Leninist ideology to accommodate the economic realities of global capitalism in the twenty-first century. Digital technology and mass communication may have rendered the old painted print poster somewhat anachronistic but visual propaganda in general remains as alive as ever, as the giant painting of Marx at Xi Jinping's 2018 address suggests. We have seen in this paper how propaganda art in the era of Mao adapted Soviet models but responded to both domestic and global political and social changes. Images of the figures of Marxism continue to abound in China today, and can be found in their canonical, recognizable forms as well as in new forms and with new political intentions. The power of the cult of personality, too, albeit somewhat tempered by comparison with the twentieth century, continues to hold sway (as is suggested by the continued rule of Xi himself, not to mention Putin, Assad, Kim, Trump, and others). The cult of Mao was sustained by a program of carefully crafted propaganda in which the poster played a central role. What role it will continue to have alongside twenty-first-century forms of visual propaganda remains to be seen. But it seems inevitable that imagery and iconography will continue to be used to serve and sustain political power, in China and indeed throughout the world

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