

THE HUFFINGTON POST

China's Propaganda Posters Illustrate Chinese Communism's Bouts with Insanity

Doug Bandow

November 7, 2015

Shanghai is China's financial capital. The former Western concession today shows little sign of the many bitter political battles fought over the last century. Tourists throng the Bund along the Huangpu River while global corporations fill the skyscrapers in Pudong, across the water.

Beijing, the capital of the People's Republic of China, also has come to look like a normal city. Ads for Western products compete with Communist Party symbols. Only around Tiananmen Square, with Mao's Mausoleum and Mao's portrait on the Heavenly Gate, does politics ostentatiously dominate.

But it is a blood sport. President Xi Jinping has been taking down so-called "tigers," starting with Zhou Yongkang, the previous security chief and country's second most powerful man. Xi also is rumored to be moving against still influential former president Jiang Zemin, the former's onetime mentor. A showdown could have dramatic and unpredictable consequences. China's future depends on this arcane maneuvering mostly hidden from public view.

At least now political losers mostly end up in prison rather than dead. During Mao Zedong's long reign personal landings often were harder. No one, no matter how high, was secure. However, similar uneasiness is returning with Xi's wide-ranging attacks on corruption often tailored to serve political ends. Although Xi's penchant for winner-take-all politics is a throwback to earlier revolutionary politics, he has not revived one of the chief public political weapons, the propaganda poster.

Of course, this political art form is not unique to the PRC. There were Chinese posters before the Revolution. Moreover, the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany used posters to push the political line of the moment. So did Western nations.

During World War I the British government was a master at manipulating emotions through posters. My favorite, proudly hung on my office wall, shows Britannia striding forth above the drowning victims of the Lusitania holding a sword, imploring readers to "take up the sword of justice." Unmentioned was the fact that the ship was a reserve cruiser carrying munitions through a war zone.

My favorite American poster from the same conflict, also proudly displayed, shows German bombers over New York City with the Statue of Liberty knocked off its pedestal, entitled "That

liberty shall not perish from the earth." Of course, Germany had neither the ability nor desire to bomb New York, but U.S. officials never let the facts get in the way of a great propaganda flourish. During World War II American posters lauded the "united nations" opposing the Nazis, as well as urged people to clean their plates and eschew the black market.

But in the U.S. posters were mostly used during brief periods of national crisis. They typically were not used to sell the government's latest political line and advance the fortunes of one political faction or another. Posters were not part of America's normal political discourse.

As China opened up posters disappeared. Many were destroyed, especially those promoting defeated political factions and disastrous policies, a past which most people desperately wanted to forget. What had become a unique art form almost disappeared.

But not if Yang Pei Ming could help it. After graduating from university, he was sent to work in a canned food factory during the Cultural Revolution, a national convulsion part civil war, part political purge, part crowd mania. When the social madness finally passed Yang became a tour guide and philatelist. He started collecting posters in 1995 and eventually saw his efforts promoting a larger purpose. He set up the Shanghai Propaganda Poster Art Center in 2002. Explained Yang: "With the shift toward a more modern and forward-thinking China, it would be a mistake to forget our history."

Given his familiarity with posters, Yang decided that "it is my responsibility to preserve them so that future generations have a chance to picture them in mind." Licensed by the government a decade later, the exhibit's official name is the Shanghai Yang Pei Ming Propaganda Poster Art Museum. Yang, whose father was killed during early revolution struggles, has accumulated 6000 different propaganda posters from 1940 to 1990, hundreds of nonpolitical "Shanghai Lady Calendar" posters from before the revolution, and a plethora of other tchotchke from Mao's suffocating personality cult: busts of various sizes, "little red books" of Mao's sayings, editions of his poetry, and more. Only about 300 propaganda posters can be displayed at any one time in the cramped space, three rooms in the basement of a small, nondescript apartment building. Despite its humble location, the museum was rated China's 6th best by Trip Advisor.

The posters are the most interesting to view. Earlier ones promoted revolution and denounced Japan, but the museum focuses on those from the People's Republic of China. The first posters look more cartoonish or stylized, reflecting an era of relative freedom. Noted Yang in a book based on the museum's holdings, *Chinese Propaganda Poster Collection*: "During these exciting times of fundamental change, artists were encouraged to celebrate the birth of a New China and many produced imaginative works showing happy and glorious times ahead." Soon the atrocious school of "socialist realism" took over, presenting the "reality" of the triumph of socialism-- happy workers and farmers busily creating a utopia on earth.

Whatever their form, the posters tell much about the politics of China. In one poster Mao towers over a crowd denouncing a profiteering capitalist. Another has Mao at the forefront of a military parade in Tiananmen Square. One shows a May Day parade in Moscow's Red Square, with a picture of Mao held aloft. A poster features revolutionaries presenting flowers to the "Great Helmsmen," as Mao eventually became known. A 1951 poster shows a large Mao, arm outstretched, surrounded by scenes from the country, entitled "New China Under Leadership of Wise Chairman Mao." Another just shows his somber head, staring out, watching over the

people. One of the most fascinating posters shows China's leaders announcing the formation of the PRC. Successive editions drop disgraced officials later purged by Mao.

Not every poster had his visage. One shows members of the People's Liberation Army being greeted by happy Chinese. Another demands the disbanding of reactionary organizations. Others show model families, community celebrations, happy workers building the new china, and people enjoying an abundance of food. One poster calls for China's complete liberation, showing a family holding the PRC flag surrounding a map of the country. Parades were a common theme--in Tiananmen Square, along Shanghai's "Bund," the former Western concession, and even a ship procession in the river. Participants featured by the poster are seen holding small posters showing Mao and sometimes other, lesser Chinese leaders.

Other posters were more pointed politically. Entitled "Drive US Imperialism Invading Force out of China," one shows a PLA soldier with a broom sweeping away the debris of a defeated foe. Many posters celebrated Beijing's relationship with the Soviet Union, showing Mao and Joseph Stalin in various glorious yet friendly poses. One from 1949 features a dominating Stalin in front of five Soviet flags, with caricatures of the discreditable Western leaders below, proclaiming: "Soviet Union is the stronghold for world peace."

The posters get more interesting when they become weapons in domestic political battles. Confronting "bandits and spies" was a common theme. Reactionaries, landlords, and other enemies also were targeted. So was the U.S., for its support of the Nationalists and intervention in the Korean War, which generated a number of wonderful hate pieces. America repeatedly was derided as a "paper tiger," while other posters extolled the friendship and cooperation of the Chinese and North Korean peoples--a relationship badly strained today. One of my favorite shows a Chinese patriot preparing to stab a blood-stained, fire-breathing Douglas MacArthur, enjoining the Chinese people to "Defend our Motherland and our Hometown." President Harry Truman might have agreed with these sentiments, given his firing of the general. Many other posters extolled the role of the heroic and well-equipped PLA, busy "defending peace." Mao showed up occasionally in these posters, but he was not a constant presence.

Still, nothing beats the idyllic country scenes, of happy, well-dressed farmers planting fields of rice, leading healthy livestock, and picking fruit in bountiful orchards. Through 1956 posters tended to emphasize peaceful development. One shows happy girls dancing in Tiananmen Square. Another has Mao holding a map of China, with an adoring crowd behind him. Another poster shows a happy peasant with his cow, proclaiming: "Stable Country with Peaceful Life." It was an ironic commentary in advance of the horrid, bloody chaos to come in the form of the "Great Leap Forward" in 1958 and "Cultural Revolution" in 1966.

Indeed, noted Yang in his poster book, beginning around 1957 "political movements started to mobilize public opinion. Almost overnight nearly one in ten Chinese intellectuals were labeled as 'rightists' in 1957 and were treated as class enemies of the people." One poster shows a worker defending against a reactionary mob, declaring: "Smash the Attack from the Rightists to Defend Socialist Construction." Many posters urged greater production and lauded "bumper harvests," as if repeated exhortation could overcome the disastrous policy mistakes of the Great Leap Forward, during which tens of millions of Chinese starved to death. Other posters continued earlier themes of Sino-Soviet friendship and resistance against the U.S. and Great Britain.

The Great Leap Forward ended during the early 1960s, when posters then reinforced the Mao cult and increased attacks on the U.S. for its involvement in Vietnam. One poster highlights a cadre, red star on his cap and Mao instruction book in his hand: "Do What Chairman Mao Says." Caricatures of Lyndon Johnson were a staple, as well as praise for Cuban revolutionaries. Hitting where it hurt, posters urged support for Americans who in fact deserved support--members of the anti-war and Civil Rights movements.

The heyday of posters was the Cultural Revolution, which began in 1966 and eventually wound down a decade later. During this period of veritable social madness the Great Helmsmen used posters to take the personality cult to new heights while denouncing his enemies, named and unnamed alike. The frenzy abated only as Mao wound down the campaign.

These posters bespeak an era when art was created to serve the state and viewers were expected to applaud enthusiastically no matter how banal or lackluster the performance. A 1968 poster captures this theme. Entitled "Undefeatable Mao Zedong Thought Shines Revolutionary Art Stage," it places his smiling, beatific face at the center, surrounded by military scenes, apparently from revolutionary productions. At the forefront, reading from his quotation collection, is his wife Jiang Qing, who became one of his political enforcers.

One hates to imagine a life spent watching such turgid political productions, but watch and applaud people did. My favorite production featured in a poster may be the "Red Detachment of Women," in which more than a dozen uniformed women perform ballet--while leveling their upheld rifles at the unseen enemy.

During this period Mao almost always was pictured beatifically, looking out, sometimes clapping or with arm outstretched, over the beautiful countryside or adoring masses. One poster showed Mao in front of Joseph Stalin, Vladimir Lenin, Friedrich Engels, and Karl Marx: "Mao Zedong Thought is the Peak of Contemporary Marxism and Leninism." Another shows an armed civilian, little red book in hand, announcing one of Mao's most important sayings: "Political Power Comes from Gun."

The Chinese people depicted almost always were active, whether as individuals or in crowds. In one poster a man holds Mao's little red book aloft in front of a crowd doing the same: "Proletarian revolutionary rebels unite." At this time the so-called Red Guards attacked not only "US imperialism" but also "Russian revisionism." Everywhere the people are busy, holding aloft the little red book, sometimes with Mao joining them, defeating enemies and purifying the revolution. "Our Reddest Sun in our Minds, Chairman Mao is with Us," declares a 1968 poster in which the smiling Great Helmsman is surrounded by adoring Red Guards waving his quotation book. Almost every participant today speaks with horror at what then occurred. But what a subject for posters! With the 1971 death of Mao's onetime heir apparent, Lin Biao, the frenzy seemed to go out of posters.

After Mao's death in 1976 posters commemorated his life, ignoring the relief that many people, including his colleagues, privately felt. Then ensued the power struggle delayed while he was alive. Much of the party turned against the "Gang of Four," whose members, including Madame Mao, had most enthusiastically carried out his dictates during the Cultural Revolution. Posters stoked the campaign: "Strike Gang of four" declares one, while another insists "Smash 'Gang of four'." One poster, with an angry crowd armed with a megaphone in the background, demands

"Criticize Gang of Four for their Crime to Seize Leadership of the Party with Anger." Some posters also extolled Hua Guofeng, Mao's successor, but he soon was pushed aside by Deng Xiaoping.

Deng officially abolished what he called the "big character poster." Doing so made sense to help promote social peace. He wanted no more political crusades or ideological campaigns, no more fevered denunciations of enemies far and wide, no more social chaos and economic disruption.

And posters have not reappeared, despite some hints of a return to leader veneration--such as plates bearing the picture of current President Xi Jinping. But what's best for China is a loss for the rest of us, at least us political junkies. The posters not only tell the PRC's always turbulent and often tragic history. They are a magnificent art form, demonstrating enormous talent, skill, and creativity.

At least Shanghai's poster museum preserves this unique art form for the rest of us to enjoy. Argued Yang: "with the shift toward a more modern and forward-thinking China, it would be a mistake to forget our recent history." The museum not only presents his unique collection, but sells replicas and more expensive duplicate originals for the genuine enthusiast. Books on Chinese posters, including that detailing the museum collection, also are available.

American politics has been ugly of late. Friends sometimes are almost as hateful as foes, and more than a few participants stand ready to destroy one's reputation for the slightest perceived offense. But still, politics in the U.S. cannot compare with that in modern China, where power and position offered little protection, even for one's life. This tumultuous process is captured by changing Chinese poster art over the years.

The Shanghai Propaganda Poster Art Center should be on the "to see" list of anyone visiting the city. Even if China isn't next on your vacation list, at least check out the museum online. You'll be simultaneously fascinated and appalled by what the Chinese have gone through--and thankful that you have not!

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, specializing in foreign policy and civil liberties.