Red Aesthetics, Intermediality and the Use of Posters in Chinese Cinema after 1949

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Red Aesthetics, Intermediality and the Use of Posters in Chinese Cinema after 1949

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Abstract: *This article focuses on the aesthetic and affective techniques of saturation through which posters legitimated the Party-State in Mao's China by closing the gap between everyday experience and political ideology. Propaganda posters were designed to put into practice the principle of unity, as conceptualised by Mao Zedong. The argument posits that while the "poster" is normally a printed edition of a painting or design intended for mass distribution in this way, the term may fairly be deployed to capture other cultural objects that function as "posters", in that they provide public, political information that expresses or constructs a political self in aesthetic form. This approach requires a metonymic understanding of a visual field in which cultural objects are interrelated and mutually reinforcing. The essay draws on recent in-depth interviews with poster artists of the 1960s and 1970s.*

Keywords: *China, PRC, Mao, posters, red art, revolutionary film, aesthetics, slogans, intermediality*

Introduction

In their heyday, in the decades after Liberation in 1949, revolutionary posters mediated the relationship between Party propaganda and everyday experience in the People's Republic of China. These "weapons of mass communication" constituted a "red sea", an immersive aesthetic field through which the Party disseminated extraordinarily powerful visual metaphors for the revolution-in-progress. It is important to note that this "red sea" of mass communication included writings, slogans, sounds, images and paintings that were explicitly designed as revolutionary propaganda (such as Mao Zedong's writings, the "model" operas espoused by his third wife, Jiang Qing, and the didactic

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"big character" posters of the late 1960s), as well as works and even historical events and cultural myths, many of which became part of the cultural production of the revolution by being re-imagined and repurposed specifically to convey socio-political messages to the masses (Clark, 2008; Evans and Donald, 1999). Accordingly, the term "poster" is here deployed metonymically and should be understood to encapsulate the entire visual and aural "sea" of which the mass-produced poster was but the pre-eminent form (Andrews, 2010; Laing, 2004; Wang, 2002).[1]

Before launching into this topic, a few words on the provenance of posters are in order. Some were designed by individual artists or created as paintings and then distributed as mass-produced posters. Individual artists might produce an iconic image that was then reproduced as a poster (such as Shen Jiawei's 'Defending the Fatherland' (1973) or Dai Ze's 'The Great Victory at Langfang' (1975, Figure 1), while others developed specialisations, such as Ou Yang and her portraits of "good children" in the mid-1960s (Powell and Wong, 1997). Many, however, were created by committee (see, for example, Figure 4). Although Mao Zedong called for posters to be both popular (*puji*) and of a high standard aesthetically (*tigao*), their artistic quality was highly variable (Andrews and Shen, 1998). More consistent was their function as an insistent voice offering information, motivation and advice, simultaneously representing the energy and direction of the Party amongst the people and telling the people how they might best serve the Party. Even if an individual artist's painting had not been specifically designed to be wholly didactic, its release at a particular time or with particular imprimaturs (say, the approval of Jiang Qing in the case of Shen Jiawei's 1973 'Defending the Fatherland') would nonetheless make it so.[2]

Figure 1. 'The Great Victory at Langfang', Dai Ze, 1975. Shanghai People's Publishing House. Photograph: the author. Courtesy: University of Westminster

Figure 2. Market "sketching" scene, *Five Golden Blossoms*

Figure 3. Villagers read the manifesto, *Li Shuangshuang*

Mao's Unity: Politics and Art; Ideology and the People

Chinese propaganda posters and related image forms used aesthetic and affective techniques that helped legitimate the Party-State by closing the gap between everyday

Figure 4. Detail from 'Down with Soviet Revisionists', 1967. Collection: University of Westminster. Artists: Department of Shanghai Publishing System Revolutionary Rebel Command, Propaganda Department of the Revolutionary Rebel Committee of the Shanghai People's Art Publishing

experience and political ideology. Propaganda posters were designed to create a new type of "political" subject wholly identified with the State, without any interruption of "social" responses such as critique, desire, irony or resistance. They were supposed to put into practice the aesthetic-political principle of unity, as conceptualised by Mao. "What we demand is the unity of politics and art," wrote Mao in 1942; "the unity of content and form, the unity of revolutionary political content and the highest possible perfection of artistic form" (Chang, 1980, p. 7). I do not suggest that this overweening ambition was ever perfectly achieved in the complex social flux of the People's Republic of China, but rather that its attempt was confidently asserted and, to a significant degree, was made effective through close political controls over artists' careers, controls that intensified in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Mao's expectation of "unity" has been variously interpreted both by artists and by commentators of socialist realism in China, and it is worth briefly reviewing these critiques before turning to the specific topic of this paper. In an early consideration of propaganda, Jacques Ellul draws a connection between the "psychological collusion of opinion" between transmitter and receiver, and the use of media as an "informational device" (Ellul, 1957, p. 65). He argues that information in and of itself requires propaganda or, as a media analyst might say today, a consistent news agenda. The more that is happening, the more the masses need some narrative of events to make sense of the changes both to which they are subject and which they are themselves enacting. Although Ellul (1957, p. 65) is not referring specifically to socialist realism, his

observation is nonetheless pertinent to understanding how Maoist propaganda appealed to the masses, and why it became a deeply embedded "collusion of opinion". Just a few years later, in 1964, John Wilson Lewis wrote of the Chinese situation that the socialist realist mode of propaganda needed to be re-imagined to appeal to youth. Such a reconfiguration would be a move away from the unity of form and content that had resulted in the "red and expert" debates of the late 1950s. To achieve "redness", a contrived political struggle had to be inserted into socialist realism as the primary point of reference and value. Technical knowledge and scientific approaches were secondary. Wilson Lewis (1965, p. 145) felt that the price of Mao's legacy would prove too high for the youth of the day and that they would resist "the propagation of revolutionary struggle". His instinct has proven true of later generations, although not through the simple break with socialist realism that he may have envisaged. In the Cultural Revolution, however, redness won out and youth were co-opted to struggle in the sphere of an idealised realism. By the late 1960s, a few years after Lewis was writing, ideal redness was amplified through the Cultural Revolution and particularly through the further perverse reduction of realism to idealised form by Mao's wife, Jiang Qing, and the cultural works that she approved as beneficial to her own political sense of revolutionary value. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the image of Mao became fetishised and subject to rules that underlined the neurotic version of revolutionary correctness in the aesthetics of Jiang Qing's period of ascendancy, but even then Julia Andrews sees the images as hybrid. Mao had to be "red, smooth and luminescent" [and] "while Soviet socialist realism is still the most evident stylistic source for such compositions, details of color and texture may also be related to the more elegant of pre-Liberation new year's pictures" (Andrews, 1994, p. 360).

Other critics have explained socialist realism as an aesthetic within a larger tradition of moral education. Perris notes that art for art's sake is not a comfortable concept in Chinese cultural production, where ideological or moral value is assumed within the aesthetic process. He suggests that this has been the case for several centuries, and one would indeed note that it was at its apogee in the Confucian Book of Ritual (*li ji*) (second century BCE). As Perris (1983, p. 16) puts it, "the Chinese tradition supports [author note: i.e. and has long supported] the twin functions of aesthetic enjoyment and ideological construction". Poster expert and collector Stefan Landsberger has traced the use of models as repositories of moral value across 60 years of Communist rule. He points out that the groundwork for the unity of form and content lies in the relation between orthodoxy and orthopraxy in traditional Chinese thought and social action (Landsberger, 2001, p. 541). Neither Perris nor Landsberger, however, conceive of the Jiang Qing aesthetic period as so marked by political narcissism that it exceeded the bounds of morality, ritual and the modelling of virtue. It is at this point that my argument differs from these accounts of the shifting meaning of realism in socialist realism over the first three decades of the People's Republic. In this regard it is relevant to consider the ways in which "unity" and "psychosis" might be aligned as co-respondents in regimes that actively seek homogeneity of artistic expression. The observations on totalitarianism and art practice made by the art historian and philosopher Boris Groys are relevant here. Groys (2011, p. 36) has traced the trajectory of revolutionary modernism from oppositional avant-gardism to the centralising project of Stalinism; "the Stalin era," he notes, "satisfied the fundamental avant-garde demand that art cease representing life and begin transforming it by means of a total aesthetic-political project".

Unification is also addressed by Claude Lefort's account of the bureaucracy in totalitarian states. He argues that, in principle, men in the bureaucratic class had absolute power in society but at the same time, no power at all except that yielded by their jobs. They constituted therefore a class that was both without limits and utterly vulnerable to the whims of the leadership (Lefort, 2007, pp. 117–18). The narcissism of the totalitarian project is thus both immense and banal, leading on the one hand to the totalisation of approved aesthetic practice, and on the other to the total evacuation by the leadership of individuated responsibility in the everyday operation of power.

Unity and Red Aesthetics in Revolutionary Poster Art: 'The Great Victory at Langfang'

The characteristic visual grammar of persuasive design and its deployment for political and patriotic ends used by some posters can be exemplified by 'The Great Victory at Langfang' (1975, Figure 1), which was a painting widely reproduced and disseminated to schools as a poster. The original was painted by Dai Ze, who was born in 1922 and trained at Beijing's Central Art Academy in the early 1940s, where he acquired a working knowledge of the European masters and of Western drawing techniques. The painting's historical reference is the Boxer Rebellion of 1900–01, and the victory over imperialist forces at Langfang in 1900. The composition of 'The Great Victory at Langfang' is along a left-to-right downward diagonal. On the left, the Boxer troops are shown bearing down on the imperialist troops, who cower in the right-hand corner. In typical Cultural Revolution style, the Boxers are wearing red, their skin tone is reddish, and their bodies are square and muscular. The imperialists are wearing white, the colour of death and of imperialism, and are small, thin and weak. These are the same physical attributes accorded to Japanese and Nationalist troops in other poster art, animations and feature films.

The dominant figure is the fighter moving directly forwards with a long spear in the foreground of the painting. Not only is this figure easily the largest, his spear provides the horizontal balance around which the rest of the painting is constructed. He, too, is entirely dressed in red, and his red skin tone is intended to indicate how the Boxer Rebellion prefigured the Maoist-Marxist-Leninist Revolution. That dual temporality is also implied by the "gua" symbol on his chest, which indicates the water sign from the *Book of Changes* (*Yi jing*). The Boxers regarded the *Book of Changes* as a sacred text, and its staunch Chineseness continued to commend itself to the anti-foreign thinking of Chinese revolutionaries, modernists and reformers throughout the twentieth century. The *Book of Changes* also had the political grace of not being aligned to Confucianism, and so the "gua" symbol may be read as Dai Ze's (Cohen, 1997, pp. 261–69) nod to the anti-Confucian campaign of the mid-1970s, when he was painting 'The Great Victory at Langfang'. Indeed, Cohen has written a detailed account of the mythologisation of the Boxers and the re-historicisation of the Red Lantern movement in Tianjin during the Cultural Revolution.

What is distinctive about the painting, however, and somewhat unusual for a poster of its time, is Dai Ze's allusion to a revolutionary image from the European tradition: to "Marianne", the feminine embodiment of the French Revolution in Eugene Delacroix's 'Liberty Leading the People' (1830). Formally, the equivalent to "Marianne" in this

painting is the male Boxer leader. He is centrally positioned, and he is depicted with his romantically torn white shirt slipping down to reveal his chest, and with his muscular sword-arm flung up and backwards. The woman fighter in the centre foreground is not a "Marianne", but is a home-grown revolutionary allusion: she is most likely an evocation of the all-female Boxer Red Lantern fighters. The positioning of the woman "Red Lantern" fighter underlines how contemporary politics determined the painting's execution. Iconographically, she is modelled on a 1900 Red Lantern warrior, but being fully clothed in red, this figure's physiognomy is similar to faces painted to represent Red Guards elsewhere in the Cultural Revolution canon, even though by this time Red Guard groups and factions had been disbanded. As a peasant woman following a male Boxer, however, she foreshadows the expectation that women were to be liberated through the leadership of the Party after 1949, specifically through the anti-Confucian movement of 1975 and the gender politics promoted by Jiang Qing, Mao's third wife and a former actress. Mythologisation of the Boxer Red Lantern group had already been linked to Qing's gender politics, through her attempt to control perceptions of her own theatrical career and to legitimise her political standing by supporting another *Red Lantern*, the model opera film from 1967. This was previously a stage opera but, as Zhang Ling (2010, p. 68) notes, "The film *The Red Lantern*, however, is in no way a visual record or documentation of the stage performance" and was indeed a ground-breaking exercise in aesthetic dogmatism. The film tells of a combined family of revolutionaries in the anti-Japanese war who, although not actually related to one another by blood, are connected through their zeal and righteousness. The secret sign of these revolutionaries is a red lantern, hence the title. Zhang (2010, p. 69) argues that "the excessive revolutionary visual rhetoric presented by body movements, facial expressions and hand gestures, combined with the close-ups and the proximity between the camera and the human body, suggest a strong sense of the corporeality and materiality of the body on the screen", and this focus on extreme idealised bodies is a common theme to 'The Great Victory at Langfang' and *Red Lantern* and to the representations of the Boxers that were specifically and deliberately referenced in both.

Past and present are thus co-temporal and co-spatial in 'The Great Victory at Langfang'. Historical figures are depicted as corporeal mutual referents to drive home contemporary political messages. Although the poster's function was to achieve aesthetic and political goals, its form also implies a dialogue with other mass media and other artistic traditions with shared goals, and it thus represents an instance of intermediality.

Unifying Politics and Art: The Deployment of Posters in Film

Given the overwhelming breadth of possibilities in discussing socialist realist aesthetics in China, this article will now concentrate primarily on the use of posters in films. Of course, the combination of posters with films complicates the story, as well as narrowing its scope. Attention to the intermedial deployment of posters in film elaborates not just the connections between art forms, but also the shifting relations between art and politics across the 1950s–90s. Tracing and interpreting the presence of posters in film assumes (correctly) that set dressing and set design (and thus the appearance or non-appearance of posters and the choice of particular posters and related images, writings or fragments)

are deliberative narrational tools. In other words, the placing of objects in the frame is neither random nor simply contingent on what is to hand, but is a choreographed element of the mise-en-scène. To understand this through the lens of film theory one might re-visit Stephen Heath's seminal work on narrative space, and the work of those who have developed his insights (Heath, 1976; Cooper, 2002). Heath makes the point that an image within an image both admits and contains the excess of meaning beyond the cinematic frame. What is in the frame gives meaning to what is presumed to be outside it, and one frame is understood in relation to others with which it is juxtaposed. This is, of course, the main point of editing. Thus, if a key protagonist is repeatedly positioned in a frame that is co-occupied by a poster, and that shot is juxtaposed with one of a protagonist without a poster, the contrast is intended and meaningful, as I will discuss later with reference to Ren Lu's film *Li Shuangshuang* (1962).

While realist filmmakers typically try to create a contained, continuous narrative space in order to persuade the viewer to suspend disbelief and buy into the narrative, control over spatiality through framing and juxtaposition characterises an avant-garde approach that may seek to disrupt previously held notions of spatial coherence (Farquhar, 1992). A frame within a frame can function to further extend the apparent continuity of narrative space through offering a window of contradiction, or to create further compression through repeating and over-determining the political aspect of the foregrounded main action. As I argue below, when posters were used to make comment or to offer didactic direction within the narrational frame, one might assume that some kind of oppositional reading was still possible. In those instances that the poster and the film image become almost impossible to distinguish from each other, the subjective gap between ideal and action can be said to have shrunk so far in the visual field of meaning that a form of aesthetic psychosis is in play. The argument of this paper is, then, that exchanges between cinematic and poster "stills" were present throughout decades of Chinese cinema but that the "excess signification" initiated by frames within the frame reached a point of *subjective disappearance*, or what we may term "pure politics", in films made at the apogee of the Jiang Qing era, 1969–74.

After 1949, Chinese filmmakers had to negotiate a steady, but sometimes erratic, patter of ideological advice. The advice reflected the various movements, inconsistencies and sudden crackdowns associated with the Chinese Communist Party's attempts to manage cinema and control its consequences during the successive periods of cinematic production. First, there was a period of 17 years of consolidation, the era of pure politics that culminated in the decade of the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). Second, the Party gave itself a difficult and somewhat contradictory task in managing the post-1978 Reform era of marketised politics, including the changes that followed the demonstrations and massacre in Tiananmen in 1989 (Ward, 2011). Throughout all these vicissitudes, however, both posters and cinema, and the mise-en-scène of posters in film, can be seen as experimental and pragmatic iterations of a persistent political-aesthetic challenge: how might a popular aesthetic be devised that would promulgate and embed, at an affective level, the principles of revolution in a Maoist-Marxist-Leninist state? The response to this question was that a reasonably straightforward didactic or pedagogic deployment of posters in the films of the consolidation period, from 1949 until about 1966, increasingly gave way, during the Cultural Revolution, to the narcissistic aesthetic of pure politics.

The Function of the Revolutionary Poster as a "Frame within a Frame"

In cinema, the combination of projected image with soundtrack renders the experience of film inherently intermedial – that is, its meanings and pleasures are generated by the interactions between more than one medium. (Even the projection of a silent film to a live musical accompaniment is a form of intermediality.) Beyond the technology, the history of cinematic narration reveals a frequent use of references to other media of communication, technologies of speech, and the arts generally, as a means of intensifying the expressivity of a sequence or shot. The convention also acts as a way of registering the specificity, distinctiveness and artifice of the medium: Hollywood's relentlessly disdainful allusions to television from the 1950s through the 1980s are a case in point. In Chinese cinema since 1949, and especially in a number of films in the 1970s, the poster has fulfilled an analogous function, although to very different ends. Posters in Chinese films provide a frame within the frame, introducing a second register of reality, which is not so much contained in the screen image as it is lodged in the symbolic realm of political power. As noted above, posters in Chinese films thus function as intermedial interventions. Although often plausible as part of the diegesis, the posters carry an extra-diegetic authority that incorporates and exceeds mere set design and mise-en-scène. The process is comparable to the operation of micro- and macro-narratives in Chinese arts and literature. As Andrew Plaks (1976, pp. 86–87) has demonstrated in relation to the Chinese canon, allegory and correspondence combine to deliver quite substantial and grounded meaning through a visual or written text. The posters clearly import the macro-narrative of Chinese society, political authority and social harmony into the films. On the micro-narrative level, the posters often appear to make the agency of characters contingent less on psychological motivation than on the iconic presence of Party and Leader (Donald, 1997; Hawkes, 2010).

Between the 1950s and the 1970s, the propaganda poster was also intermedial insofar as it was consumed in relation to other media, notably radio broadcasts, public meetings and information boards, and film.[3] All communication aimed at rural or mass audiences, rather than intellectuals or Party elites, was designed to be direct and uncluttered. Many Chinese were still functionally illiterate, and most had limited time to read extensively or to consider the subtleties of scholarly art forms. Films were screened in cinemas in large cities and distributed to rural areas through mobile film troupes. Arguably, posters were the first and most accessible visual address from the Party and film was the second, whereas radio, delivered through inescapable loudspeakers, was the most insistent. On radio, the voice of authority was direct and often issued immediate instructions. Intermediality was performative or referential: "performative", if villagers then felt obliged to march around their village repeating the instructions, and "referential", if large character or printed posters reiterated or contextualised those instructions. On film, however, the narrative suture of a collective socialist subject, through the aestheticisation (*meihua*) of socialist perfection, was powerfully combined with the authority represented by the poster.

From Pedagogy to Psychosis

A selection of three examples is sufficient to illustrate how posters were deployed in film in the period between Liberation and the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. What becomes apparent is a trajectory from political didacticism to pure politics.

Nülan wuhao, or *Girl Basketball Player No. 5* (dir. Xie Jin, 1957) is set in a sports training centre, and the focus is on self-improvement in the pursuit of national glory. This message is reinforced by four posters shown in the course of the film. They are deployed, unambiguously, to informative and pedagogical ends. The first poster sets the scene for the film's national and ideological frame of reference. It presents a direct quote from Mao: "Strengthen people's health". The next two posters reinforce the gendered aspirations of *Girl Basketball Player No. 5* – the film's basketball player protagonist is a young woman (*nü qingnian*). The second, hanging in the centre's admission hall, shows a woman on a motorcycle. The third is a poster for the 1956 Olympics, with the image of a sportswoman anchored by the caption: 运动员们为祖国争取荣誉 ("Athletes, win glory for your country"; Yundongyuanmen wei zuguo zhengqu rongyu). The fourth poster shows a woman athlete running, with the national flag of the People's Republic streaming behind her. The didacticism of these posters is transparent and unapologetic.

Two very different films made in 1959, *Lin Family Shop* (*Linjia puzi*, dir. Shui Hua)[4] and *Five Golden Blossoms* (*Wuduo jinhua*, dir. Wang Jiayi), both make extensive use of decorative arts, such as wall hangings and posters, for more subtle pedagogic ends. *Lin Family Shop* is set in a small town in 1931. Although ostensibly about the moral failings of the bourgeoisie, the film deals most effectively with the everyday challenges of the small-business owner and the impact of war on family life. (It thus inherits some features of the Shanghai city melodramas of the 1930s.) The Lin family lives in a comfortable house behind their shop, clearly distinguished from the street lives of refugees and the poor. The business is still part of a credit-based mercantilist system, and Mr Lin defaults on his poorer creditors when he cannot repay his loans to a bank. In most sequences in which he discusses money matters with his creditors or debtors, Mr Lin is framed by landscape paintings on the wall, indicating his taste and bourgeois status even in the face of ruin. The film's use of decorative hanging scrolls does two things: it recalls that art in domestic environments was the norm prior to the introduction of political posters for domestic consumption; it also underlines how, when calligraphic texts and moral injunctions are displayed, the line between pure decoration and domestic pedagogy is already blurred. Mr Lin's residual and reprehensible conservatism is thus conveyed, within the film, by his aesthetic preferences. Even so, and despite intertitles and voice-overs instructing the audience to condemn him for these failings, Xie Tian's gentle and persuasive performance of Mr Lin still renders the protagonist as not inherently evil and as personally likeable. As a result, *Lin Family Shop* was criticised for its bourgeois sympathies. Xie Tian himself found his acting career stalled, further indication of the critics' desire to see the gap between performativity, ontology and ideological absolutes closed.

Set among the minority Bai people in Yunnan, *Five Golden Blossoms* tells the story of a young man, Ah Peng, who returns to seek his lover, Jinhua, after a year's absence. It is a "lost-and-found" romantic comedy of errors, set against the backdrop of the Great Leap Forward and the steel production drive. There are five girls called "Jinhua" in the two regions where Ah Peng searches, but eventually he locates the right girl. She also turns out to be the most politically advanced of the five: she is a deputy commune leader. The romance unfolds in a fever of political activity, national development and the rollout of communications technology. Posters and slogan banners, with their

white writing on red backgrounds, appear more frequently than in *Girl Basketball Player No. 5*, reflecting the stridency of the second Five Year Plan, for 1958 to 1962. Posters picturing minority people provide a backdrop to scenes in which Bai characters are working, arguing or romancing.

The overall effect of these films is to bring about an over-determined appropriation of both individual and collective Bai subjectivity, seen most powerfully in the film's final market scene. A Han engineer, who features in a subplot about the arrival of telephone technology, stands sketching the head of a Bai woman. She is watching a public entertainment, and seems oblivious to his attentions. The shot is framed so that the film's spectators look over his shoulder at the drawing, but no diegetic Bai protagonists register the incident. The sketch is, of course, both an idealised representation of the woman in the film, and a variation on the theme of idealised representations of the minority workers in the rest of the film, and in China more generally. Most strikingly, although the mise-en-scène suggests that the engineer is sketching from life, he is in fact creating an image that resembles less his living model than the dress and features of the Bai already embedded in the imagination of the majority Han Chinese. So, in a certain sense his sketch does seem accurate but the sketch and the woman are simultaneously imagined. Neither precedes the other. The presumption of the film is that the poster images will teach both spectators and protagonists about the capacities and appearance of ethnicity. The sketching scene confirms the absolute prerogative of the Han technicians, as the representatives of Party-led progress, to usurp these processes of creation, appropriation and display.

What becomes evident in *Five Golden Blossoms* is thus a diminishing gap between the film on the screen and a melodrama of pure politics. The idealisation of the minority subject, in the various poster images of Bai men and women, turns the five Jinhuas encountered in the film into endlessly reproducible and undifferentiated instances of minority beauty and national virtue.

With its domestic scale, its cohesion of form and content, and its compelling central performance, the exemplary poster film from the early 1960s is, without doubt, *Li Shuangshuang*. It also displays symptomatic developments in the way that posters are embedded in the filmic text. There are three categories of poster: printed domestic decorations in Li Shuangshuang's home, the fragment of a poster in a communal open space, and a manifesto written by Li Shuangshuang and posted on the village notice-board. This is the first film in which the protagonist not only exemplifies the model subject of the printed posters, but expresses the Party line in her own words on her own poster.

> After reaping the wheat, putting down the spade, women rest. Meanwhile they say that there is not enough labour to dig the canal and work in the field. Truly, the cadres don't want to be bothered. The work-point calculation is badly done, and we don't know who is actually doing the counting. We hope the job will be done and the points allotted, and we remember that women can hold up half the sky.[5]

Fellow villagers read the manifesto approvingly, particularly the women foregrounded in the shot. The fragment of a poster of a peasant woman is stuck on the same board,

reinforcing Li's text with the authority of a printed slogan or directive. The remnant of the printed image supplies the aesthetic reference through which her words claim moral rectitude.

In the interior of her own home, it is Li herself who is framed and legitimised by the printed image. The posters on her walls confer authority on a particular point of view, rather as Mr Lin's bourgeois paintings compromised him. Li Shuangshuang is the moral centre of the film. When she argues with her corrupt and apolitical husband, she is positioned with either the poster of Mao in the background or, later (after her poster-manifesto has prompted her election to the village committee), with a poster of a peasant woman that reads, "Learn about culture and science". The reverse shots of her husband are framed with either a simple New Year picture or by an unadorned wall. Li Shuangshuang can be paired directly with the poster-as-ideal-subject, as she is herself a prime revolutionary subject from the outset. Nevertheless, Li's status as a subject who takes advice from others, and who has an aura of ordinariness and occasional vulnerability about her, means that she is still a sane political subject rather than an articulation of psychotic narcissism, which is arguably what we begin to encounter in the "model" operas and films (Hawkes, 2010, p. 76).

A Cinema of Pure Politics

In 1963, Jiang Qing reformed the Peking Opera and created eight model revolutionary operas, which introduced a propagandistic aesthetic based on a simplified Maoist ideology pitting exemplary farmers, workers and revolutionary soldiers against stereotypically wicked landlords and anti-revolutionaries (Roberts, 2010a; 2010b). This notion of "model" works in opera, ballet and then film was, in effect, her response to Mao's demand for "the unity of politics and art" and "the unity of revolutionary political content and the highest possible perfection of artistic form". In this period, the previous multifocal relationship between poster and film collapsed, briefly, into a cinema of pure politics.

In the political minefield of the Cultural Revolution, poster aesthetics were likewise subordinated to the Party line. By 1967, posters provided their viewers with starkly delineated "pro" and "anti" positions encouraging correct thinking and behaviour and denouncing incorrect thinking and behaviour. An example such as 'Down with Soviet Revisionists' (Figure 4) is drenched in redness, and uses wide variations in scale and miniaturisation in order to demonstrate moral hierarchies between revolutionaries and revisionists.

In the frenzied political atmosphere of 1967–68, the compulsion to communicate new and immediately important political statements, factional positions and collective denouncements changed the nature of posters. Words written directly on paper and thus unmediated by either a formal design or print production process often pre-empted the more formalised red-and-black posters. These three-colour printed productions of red, black and white, which had themselves streamlined and to an extent brutalised political imagery, were made increasingly redundant in the face of the viscerally scribed "Word". I deliberately capitalise "Word" to indicate the way in which these edicts were intended by those who were writing, whether on paper or on walls or on blackboards around the country, to be closest to the word of power, if not to that of an absolute

deity. In these "big character" posters (*dazibao*), the image was supposed to express literally the will of the Leader, or the faction closest to him. These posters represented, and incited, extreme aggression. The design is agitated and explicit, as if to admit that the posters' political authority is both absolute and uncertain. It also calls to mind Dovring's (1959, p. 100) theory of propaganda, wherein "agitation is the preparation for propaganda [or] propaganda is the purpose of agitation". The posters often denounced individuals and called for their death, but they also announced and spurred on the death of other less visible counter-revolutionaries among the population (whether by murder or suicide). This violence is typically reduced to a metonym, often a fist or a boot, and the victims are miniaturised, coloured white or yellow, and squashed, pummelled, speared or thrown into free fall.

At the same time, the use of posters in film changed. In *Red Lantern* (also 1967), for example, only one poster appears: a folk-art papercut on the wall of the Grandmother's peasant home. This depicts a butterfly – a reference, most probably, to a tale of two "butterfly lovers", Zhu Yingtai and Liang Shanbo, separated in life by misunderstanding and patriarchy, but reunited as butterflies after death. The butterfly in the film suggests that the Grandmother's own hero, her dead husband, is expecting her to sacrifice herself, literally or politically, to the revolutionary struggle. Films such as *Red Lantern* had no need of aggressive *dazibao*. They had become narcissistic, in the sense that the film-image had become not just an expression of the Party line, but its absolute reflection, with no further intermediation necessary or possible. Total authority was presented at the level of the cinematic image; external symbols of authority had become redundant. The shift from the poster as a didactic ideal to the film subject-as-poster might be interpreted as a reversal of the Lacanian mirror phase. When, in the earlier films, political authority was ascribed to the posters within the frame, this implied – and indeed required – an understanding that ideological authority is made visible to both protagonists and spectators by the inclusion of the posters. The recognition that the political ideal and the politicised subject are separate – even though the latter is strongly influenced by the former – was lost in the model films of the Cultural Revolution period.

The implication of that loss is threefold. First, all representation was subsumed and collapsed into the ideal or antithesis. The possibility that a subject of representation might exist as a social subject, defined through interactions with other people and with society, was thus ruled out of court. Second, the prescriptive aesthetic principles of poster art, under Jiang Qing, were close to, if not exactly the same as, those required for film characterisations. The only image, other than the "bright red, tall and shining" (*hong gao guang*)[6] revolutionary subject, that remained essential was the portrait of Mao, or a metonymic sun image, which became the defining standard of all other representations. Third, slogans were still used extensively, indicating that the textual and the visual now formed a single plane in the film. The exegetical bond between cinematic image and political line had become absolute.

The final shot in *Red Lantern*, for example, depicts the red lantern, a symbol of revolutionary duty being passed from generation to generation, superimposed on the red flag, with only the protagonist's hand visible at the bottom of the screen. The lantern also acts as – to use Roland Barthes's term – the *punctum* of authority within the film. The poster aesthetic has, in effect, colonised the cinematic narrative, apparently succeeding in achieving Mao's unity between politics and art. If it did, however, it was at the cost of an aesthetic psychosis, whereby spectator, topic and narration came to form

an undifferentiated, composite subject/object. In an ethos of pure politics, films could no longer take a distance from the posters within them, just as the social had been collapsed into the political. The visual field had only one generative point of reference: the revolutionary Real, manifest in Mao's image or in signs of his immanence. To reinforce this underlying and pervasive authority, films of this period were prefaced by white-on-red credits that featured extended quotations from Mao's works, thus providing a frame for understanding the visual drama to come. The film was the poster was the film. In *Sparkling Red Star* (1974), the young boy Shanshan's mother swears allegiance to Chairman Mao and, as she does so, the film cuts to the sun rising in the East. These shots position the spectator as the bearer of the socialist realist gaze, whereby the Leader is assumed to be simultaneously immanent and off-screen. This concept has been theorised as a key "psychoanalytic visualization of politics" in Maoist cinema – elaborated by Donald (2000, pp. 135–37) and McGrath (2010, pp. 343 ff.) in discussions of the socialist realist gaze. In this period of intense colour, the tonal saturation and melodramatic metonymy induce an aesthetic closure, which effectively annihilates the subject within the frame.

  None of these observations should be taken to imply that Jiang Qing's totalitarian red aesthetics, and the pure politics of the poster-film, were always (or ever) as effective as they were intended to be. The desire of "the would-be totalitarian" for absolute power should never be confused with its achievement. "We may laugh at him … or psychoanalyse him," Robert Fine wisely cautions, "but we must not take his pretensions too seriously" (2007, p. 188). Megalomaniacs certainly exist and they are often lethally dangerous. Fine's point is simply that we need neither collude in their self-deception, nor underestimate the capacity of interpolated subjects to resist or to change when the opportunity arises. After Mao's death, Jiang Qing's stranglehold over cultural politics soon began to unravel. Cecile Lagesse has shown how the removal of Jiang Qing was soon followed by the belated introduction of André Bazin's ideas about cinema into Chinese aesthetic theory in the 1980s and 1990s, which in turn encouraged filmmakers to seek "narrative ambiguity", "elusiveness" and "authenticity", and to start making use of both the long shot and the long take (2011, p. 320). In the same spirit, Reform Era filmmakers began to experiment with different uses of the poster, and to present at least coded critiques of the political aesthetic of the Cultural Revolution.

Re-viewing Red Aesthetics in Reform Era Cinema

A film from the 1990s that is explicit in its cynicism about the earlier posters, and what they represented, is *Black Snow* (1990).[7] Whereas the protagonists of *Five Golden Blossoms* bought and sold ethnic craft objects, in *Black Snow*, made at a time when capitalism and marketisation had already become more urgent than ideological purity or class struggle, posters themselves are nothing more than commodities to be traded in street markets. A nostalgic flashback to the *Black Snow* protagonist's days as a Young Pioneer in the 1970s reinforces the irrelevance of the posters' idealised images of Chinese youth to the way he lives in the present. In his (urban) home there is one peeling poster, which must have belonged to his mother, now passed away, but for his own bedroom walls he has chosen pictures of Sylvester Stallone as Rambo and of scantily

clad foreign women. These date from the 1980s, and they are seen as already dated within the film, reminding us that the main protagonist has been in prison over the cusp of the decades. The political poster is thus conflated with more recent fetishes, and the detail of history recedes.

The Denunciation of Uncle Shangang (1994) tells the story of an old-fashioned village leader who gets into trouble for his rough methods of administering law and order. When the county police first visit him in his home, they see his many awards for model leadership, a banner proclaiming "Be united and protect our forests, bringing benefit to our people", and a poster of Mao in pride of place. The police go on to criticise Shan in the "presence" of his hero in three separate sequences. Times have moved on since Li Shuangshuang seized the moral high ground with her banner, and the portrait of Mao is no longer an effective talisman. Now, the place where Uncle Shangang seems most at home is in the local market, surrounded by people who have known him all his life and want to protect him from the law. These scenes depict a messy and sociable public arena, which provides a contrast to the stiff formality and embarrassment of the policemen who have come to bring down an old Party man. In the final sequence, Shan is driven away weeping in a police van, his pride shattered. His anachronistic politics have become an embarrassment, but there is no place for him either in the sociality represented by the market. (Shan thus takes a similarly forlorn ideological journey to that of Mr Lin in *Lin Family Shop*, although in the opposite direction.) By the 1990s, the poster in film had come to function primarily as a comment on the political and historical redundance of the millions who modelled themselves on the mass line, whether the tragic village boss in *Uncle Shangang* or the Young Pioneer-turned-petty criminal in *Black Snow*.

Conclusion

This discussion has indicated how the intermedial deployment of posters and related visual forms in Chinese films after 1949 might be read as a response to the dramatic changes in the political, industrial and ideological context in which both films and posters were produced. Although unique to the case of post-Liberation China, the study may have wider implications for historians of socialist visual production systems more broadly, insofar as it throws up new questions about "propaganda" and the ways in which it does or does not work – in the sense of embedding social predispositions aesthetically through the senses, and affectively as well as ideologically through reason, interest and belief. Specifically, I have suggested that socialist realism in China underwent a profound transformation in the late 1960s. It transformed from a site of cultural production that employed the aesthetics of socialist realism to didactic moralising on behalf of the Party and the State, to an undifferentiated aesthetic world, in which the form and content were united without the mediation of pedagogy or any acknowledgment of a world beyond the imaginary of an idealised Real. This transformation has been traced through a reading of the use of posters in films.

In the period between Liberation and the Cultural Revolution, films such as *Girl Basketball Player No. 5*, *Lin Family Shop* and *Five Golden Blossoms* used posters to insert political doctrine into their stories – the ideological frame within the narrative frame, interrupting the flow of the film but reinforcing the primacy of politics in a

revolutionary State. Given the movement towards the 1967–75 aesthetic of pure politics on film, however, in hindsight it becomes apparent that the deployment of posters in those earlier films still allowed more dialogic levels of presumed attention and ideological subjectivity on the part of both protagonists and spectators. Until 1967 it would still have been possible, or even necessary, for a spectator in the audience to ask: is this film *about politics* (in the sense that its address was pedagogic and/or didactic) or is it an aesthetic embodiment of *pure politics*? The theoretical question with regard to the spectatorial relation of the presumed audience would then be: were they participating in an act of idealisation, or were they part of a political reality, in which watching the film would have been as much an aesthetic acquiescence of the self, as it was a sensual commitment to the matter of the screen?

The political absolutism and aesthetic dogmatism of the Cultural Revolution can thus be seen as an attempt to banish the distance between spectatorial imagination and screen image. This was the narcissism latent in Mao's ideal of unity, the identity of politics with aesthetics so as to bind the spectator wholly into the revolutionary ideology of Party and Leader – Walter Benjamin's "politicisation of aesthetics" with a vengeance, one might say.

Notes

1. This paper contributes to scholarship on the form and changing politics of public communication in China, although no one to date has really considered the context of the psychopathology of revolutionary subject formation. Relevant international studies include Aulich (2011), Wollaeger (2006), Herf (1994) and Bonnell (1997).
2. Also known as 'Standing Guard for Our Great Fatherland'. For background notes see Julia F. Andrews (1994, p. 364). Andrews was instrumental in re-establishing the work through her curatorial practice.
3. The examples discussed here are drawn from a sampling of 100 well-known films produced between 1955 and 1995.
4. This work was based on Mao Dun's 1932 novel and play of the same name (republished 2004). The novel deals with the impact of the 28 January incident – a short outbreak of war between Japan and China – on a local business.
5. '收罢麦，放下铲，妇女在家好清闲，修渠种地劳力少，都因干部怕麻烦，工分记得太马虎，不知谁是记分员，希望认真把分记，妇女能顶半个天'(shouba mai, fangxia chan, funü zai jia haoqingxian, xiuqu hongdi laoli shao, douyin ganbu pa mafan, gongfen jide tai mahu, buzhi shui shi jifenyuan, xiwang renzhen ba fenji, funü neng ding bange tian) (author's translation).
6. The other common term was *gao da quan*. Both were in common usage but the first has been quoted to the author by several ex-poster artists who were active in the 1960s in specific relation to changes required of them in the "re-touching" of works for approval. See Gu Xiong's comment on the general application of tri-phrasing (and other translations): "According to revolutionary theory, the human body was to be depicted in an idealized manner – 'red, smooth and luminescent' and 'tall, robust and perfect'…" (2010, pp. 107–08).
7. The original title *Benmingnian* refers to the idea that one's birth year, which recurs every 12 years, is not always the luckiest time.

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