Contextualising (propaganda) posters

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Increasingly, visual materials are seen as primary source materials for the study of (aspects of) the recent and most recent history of the People’s Republic of China. For those periods when moving images were hard to produce, present, store and preserve, visual materials in various printed forms have often become the only remaining witnesses of what the past may have looked like.

When researching visual images, or more specifically in this paper (propaganda) posters that were designed and produced to provide information, change attitudes or even behaviours—in short, images that served to impose a regime of truth—one runs the danger of taking their visual information at face value by considering it as a reflection of reality as it existed at the time of their design or production. A propaganda poster, however, is not necessarily a faithful recording of such an existing reality; it is rather a sanitised version of it, or even a glimpse of an idealised future based on a recognisable reality that may have existed. In order to put the information gleaned from the posters into perspective, we need to know more about the dynamics of poster production itself. Moreover, we have to look at the reception of these posters and the effects they may or may not have had.

So what is it exactly that we see when we analyse these posters? What do we know about the broader communications strategy that guided their publication at the time? What do we really know about the actual production process of any given poster, from design to print to distribution to consumption? Were specific artists commissioned for certain topics because of their artistic abilities? Or was it because of their political standpoint? Were the original artworks selected from a much wider offering of similar or comparable pieces? Who decided on the contents or slogan(s) of the posters, or on the number of copies to be printed? Who gave the final imprimatur? Were specific themes produced for specific target groups? How, and how widely, were they distributed? Do large numbers of editions and copies printed also mean that the posters in question were in huge demand?
A second, equally important, set of questions deals with the effects these posters may have had. How successful were they in the end in providing information, and in changing attitudes or even behaviours? Were they popular? Were they bought by ordinary people, and if so, why? Were they appreciated for their artistic content or their political intention? Which posters were put up for aesthetic pleasure and which ones served only political or functional goals? What was their symbolic value, if any? As the generations of ‘witnesses of history’ who actually grew up surrounded by posters and other visual stimuli leave this world, it becomes increasingly difficult to have such questions answered. In the meantime, very little research has been done until now on the actual consumption, reception and influence of posters.

Having collected, analysed and worked with Chinese posters for more than three decades, I think the time has come for us to make a concerted effort to find ways to answer (some of) the questions raised above. This will enable us to find out whether the materials ever served the purposes for which they were produced and thereby establish their usefulness as sources.

**Production-Side Questions**

*The Organisational Framework*

Exact information about the poster-designing process is hard to come by. After 1949, established artists from many disciplines were co-opted by the regime to produce inspirational and motivational images that could be mass-produced. Long before the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had attained power, the educational deficit of the majority of the population had prompted the policy-makers to look for media and styles with which the problem of illiteracy could be solved. Some of the co-opted artists had a commercial background, having worked for advertising agencies or commercial publishers, some had been exponents of the commercialised ‘Shanghai Style’ that had been so popular in the urban areas. Other artists had joined the army or revolutionary movement at an early stage and had been trained in the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), or had gained prominence during the Yan’an period (1935–47). Many of the latter had started their artistic careers at the Lu Xun Academy of Literature and Art (*Luyì*), established in Yan’an in 1938, and were well-versed in the political dimensions that their works now had to feature. These dimensions, which were related primarily to the position according