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# Activating Images: The Ideological Use of Metapictures and Visualized Metatexts in the Iconography of the Cultural Revolution<sup>†</sup>

Francesca Dal Lago

## Textual and Visual Metalanguage

In *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, W. J. Mitchell (1994: 35) defines metapictures as “pictures about pictures—that is, pictures that refer to themselves or to other pictures, pictures that are used to show what a picture is.” He refers to a particular type of representation whose goal is to turn the viewer’s attention “back to the process of image making” (36). This definition is useful with respect to a specific iconographical feature in certain posters of the Cultural Revolution (1966–76): references to other images to create a form of metalanguage. Such visual quotations of other images (or visualized metatexts) that are distinct from what I call the “surface image” extend and amplify the poster’s overall ideological function.<sup>1</sup> I use the term “surface image” to describe the overall representation and composition of an image that includes within its frame a reference to other images, which I call “internal images.” Internal images might also include texts (in this specific case, texts inscribed on clearly separate and self-standing objects, such as slogans on a wall,

<sup>†</sup> This article is a reworked version of a paper presented in March 2002 at the conference *Cultural Production and the Cultural Revolution*, Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design, Vancouver.

<sup>1</sup> Mitchell (1994: 2) discusses the difference between the surface image and the internal image as “the structure of ‘inside and outside,’ first- and second-order representation, on which the whole concept of ‘meta-’ is based. An image of nested, concentric spaces and levels is required to stabilize a meta-picture, or any second-order discourse, to separate it cleanly from the first-order object-languages it describes.” Ellen Johnston Laing (1988: 12) mentions how, in Soviet portraiture, “secondary vignette motifs were introduced in the background, functioning as ‘commentary’ on the individual portrayed.” For an

example of a similar instance in non-Chinese posters, see the poster *Lenin and Gandhi* (1927) by an unknown artist. See Schnapp 2005: 109; or Lafont 2007: 113, 182, 196. In the example on p. 182, figures in the portraits on the wall clap in approval to the zealous student displayed below them; the poster is titled *Drawing, Music and Singing Lessons Will Definitely Increase Pupils' Cultural Standards!* (1959). In the example on p. 196, portraits of Lenin and Stalin feature on flags.

<sup>2</sup> "Static" instances of portraits within images are to be found, for example, in Guowuyuan wenhuazu meishu zuopin zhengji xiaozu bian 1974: 4, 5; and Landsberger 1997: 62.

<sup>3</sup> Wu 1996: 235. The image is reproduced in Wu 1996: 118, illustration 98.

<sup>4</sup> Texts in English on the subject include Andrews 1994; Laing 1988; Evans/Donald 1999; Landsberger 1996; Landsberger/Min/Duo 2003; and Landsberger 2005.

<sup>5</sup> "Visual propaganda allows us to comprehend the official discourse

banners, and *dazibao*). These textual internal images (visual metatexts) differ from slogans and inscriptions used to comment on the surface image, which are clearly placed outside of its frame, either at the bottom or the side of the image. A common type of internal image, which I do not discuss here, is the representation of the portrait of Chairman Mao Zedong within an image. These representations are normally static quotations that do not demand or elicit any active reenactment by the viewer, apart from the worship of Chairman Mao and his thought.<sup>2</sup> Instead, I focus on images where the quoting of another image or text is employed as a strategy to stimulate a certain active behavior on the part of the viewer.

The use of images within images is not a new strategy in the history of Chinese visual representation. In his book *The Double Screen: Medium and Representation in Chinese Painting*, Wu Hung (1996) discusses a formally similar, but conceptually different, practice found in traditional Chinese painting: the representation of screens within Chinese paintings. The primary purpose of such representations was to create internal spatial and narrative partitions, while at the same time providing moral commentary on the main figure in the painting. A famous example of the internal reinforcement provided by such double representation is the portrait of Emperor Qianlong attributed to Yao Wenhan and datable to 1745, titled *One or Two?*, in which the "emperor thus employed the old 'double screen' formula to intensify his self-mystification."<sup>3</sup>

Studies of the visual culture of the Cultural Revolution normally analyze the institutional structure behind its production and the political and economic conditions that inform its visual language.<sup>4</sup> The type of visual analysis that Victoria Bonnell (1997: 19) defines in *The Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Posters Under Lenin and Stalin* as "the relations of domination as they were visually inscribed on the hearts and minds of the Soviet Russian People" has, for the most part, yet to be undertaken in the Chinese case.<sup>5</sup> Inspired by Bonnell, my analysis also stems from the centrality during the Cultural Revolution of the ideological effort to activate

new social identities through political communication. The function and massive distribution of images at the time reflected Mao's faith in mass communication's fundamental role in initiating social change. Mao believed that re-creating a condition of ongoing struggle similar to the process that had originally contributed to the political success of the Chinese Communist Party was necessary for his faction, which was threatened by the liberalizing economic reforms of the pragmatic faction, led by Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping, in the early 1960s, to regain power. By stimulating emotional tensions and creating a continuous state of social mobilization, new political and social transformations could be implemented.<sup>6</sup>

The visual rhetoric of images and the notion of their massive dissemination for propaganda purposes came from experience acquired by the Communist leadership while mobilizing peasants in the 1920s. The political impetus of the Cultural Revolution stemmed from Mao's long-held conviction that, as expressed by Frederick T. C. Yu (1964: 27) "given a proper technique of social manipulation, almost anything could be accomplished." His form of popular indoctrination made use of a forceful oral and emotional approach and was first deployed on an experimental basis with illiterate peasants in his native Hunan. This approach became one of the bases of the propaganda in the struggle against Japan (1937–45) and later against the Nationalists (1945–49), when the support of the rural population proved crucial to the Communists' eventual victory.<sup>7</sup> Mao's anti-intellectualism and his faith in the power of direct propaganda inspired him to choose visual forms of indoctrination and political education diametrically opposed to the tradition of Chinese elite cultural practices, which he considered inadequate to reach the illiterate masses. Given the importance of the ideological strategy during the Cultural Revolution to inculcate new behaviors, communication had to be ubiquitous and powerfully expressive: traditional forms of popular visual culture were adopted for the new political strategy.<sup>8</sup>

One of the main goals of the Cultural Revolution was the radical

on power in Soviet Russia and its transformation over time" (Bonnell 1997: 19). An exception to the general treatment mentioned above is provided by some of the essays in Evans and Donald (1999), especially in Harriet Evans, "'Comrade Sisters': Gendered Bodies and Spaces" (63–78), in which the author provides a close reading of images of women in the iconography of the Cultural Revolution posters. Maria Galikowksi (1998: 164–169) also discusses aspects of the codified use of images during this period.

<sup>6</sup> Liu 1971: 30. A similar concept is also discussed by Frederick T. C. Yu (1964: 31): "Chinese Communism is a class revolution and the key word in Communist ideology is *tou cheng* or struggle. . . . In this struggle, persuasion serves a dual function. It acts as a kind of fuel that provides the driving power of the struggle. It also acts as a kind of lubricant that helps to smooth the operation. It is used to inflame as well as to soothe the mass emotions in the struggle."

<sup>7</sup> On the use of visual propaganda during the Anti-Japanese War, see Francesca Dal Lago 2005.

<sup>8</sup> "The popular media are thus employed by the Party as an instrument to aid the process of correct recognition, so that the Chinese will know what is desirable for them to know and see what is desirable for them to see" (Chu 1978: 6).

transformation of Chinese political culture and the realization of “the same sort of ‘revolutionary breakthrough’ in the cultural sphere that had already been achieved in the military-political and socio-economic realms” (Dittmer 1977: 67). Because the goal of propaganda was to relay specific messages, visual strategies for conveying specific political meanings had to be carefully selected. In “Thought Reform and Cultural Revolution: An Analysis of the Symbolism of Chinese Polemics,” Lowell Dittmer (1977: 67–85) adopts a linguistic paradigm to analyze the functions of mass communication during the Cultural Revolution. He discusses the political language of the period as a “‘semiological system’ possessing its own ‘syntactics’”—a form that allows for the “organization of various linguistic symbols within the message” (69). In this system, symbols served to mediate between political culture and collective psychology, thus facilitating interactions between the leadership and the masses.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Bonnell (1997: 10) also mentions the applicability of the linguistic paradigm to the visual analysis of the Soviet posters: “[M]y overall strategy is to use an analytic framework based on a linguistic analogy, treating images as part of a visual language (with a lexicon and syntax) in which all elements are interdependent.”

### **Activating Texts and Inspiring Figures: The Role of Models and *Dazibao* in the Agitational Strategies of the Cultural Revolution**

During the Cultural Revolution, traditional strategies of value formation were invoked through an unconscious reference to Confucian ethics by redirecting the value of loyalty to superiors and elders toward the Party and its leaders. The moral use of visual language, painting in particular, and the pedagogical function of visualizing models for correct behaviors had been a recurrent feature in Chinese art and critical art texts as far back as the second century (Cahill 1960: 117). In the ninth century, Zhang Yanyuan, in his *Lidai minghua ji* (Record of famous painters of successive dynasties), commented on the moral function of the images of earlier rulers: “from this we may know that paintings are the means by which events are preserved in a state in which they serve as models [for the virtuous] and warnings [to the evil]” (in Acker 1954:75).

The role of Confucianism and the overlap created through the implementation of the system of behavioral models is an accepted reading

of the Party's visual propaganda strategies (Landsberger 1995: 26). The similarity between the social and moral subordination prescribed by traditional Confucian society and the social surveillance practiced by the Communist regime suggests continuity between the persuasive practices of these two apparently opposed systems. The use of models in both systems derives from their potential to embody positive or negative values and to provide a graphic representation on how one is expected to "activate" a sanctioned text. By "activate," I mean both to understand in a passive way and to be stirred by that understanding toward some action. In this way, social and political values become less abstract and more easily internalized by a predominately illiterate population (Landsberger 1995: 26). Stefan Landsberger (1995: 26) coins the term "Confucian Leninism," which "combines the controlling element of both Confucianism and Leninism and makes everyone constantly aware of what constitutes behavior in accordance with the definition of one's role." The creation of new models to visualize the future is also related to Soviet propaganda practice, where models were employed to activate the formation of new social identities.<sup>10</sup>

Another form of political agitation during the frenzy of the early years of the Cultural Revolution was the *dazibao*, a kind of handwritten poster hung in public places, whose visual presence was ubiquitous in the daily life of the period. *Dazibao*, the most radical form of public communication and direct political denunciation, became a powerful tool of mass arousal. This medium has attracted much attention in Western scholarship on the cultural and political changes of the period.<sup>11</sup> David Poon (1978: 2001), for instance, discusses how the Maoist faction, with the help of the Red Guards, "had skillfully converted the writing, reading and studying of *dazibao* into a political obligation." Adopted to reawaken a revolution that Mao perceived as "dormant" after the moderate political shift of the early 1960s, *dazibao* were used to actively incite the masses to participate in a revived revolution. More practically, given the control maintained by

<sup>10</sup> On the use of models in the Soviet Union, Victoria Bonnell (1997: 14) writes, "the purpose of political art beginning in the 1930s, was to provide a visual script, an incantation designed to conjure up new modes of thinking and conduct, and to persuade people that the present and the future were indistinguishable."

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of the influence of *dazibao* visibility on contemporary Chinese art, see Dal Lago 2001.

the opposing faction over official media, including radio and newspapers, the *dazibao* offered Mao and his supporters a direct channel of interaction with the masses (Poon 1978: 193; Kraus 1991: 98).

During the earliest phase of the Cultural Revolution, Mao himself launched one of his most radical attacks through a *dazibao*, “Bombard the Headquarters—My Big Character Poster” (August 5, 1966), in which he promoted the use of this medium, which had first appeared in May at Beijing University (Poon 1978: 194–195). Mao’s validation was the starting point of a huge campaign that became one of the most graphically revolutionary processes in history. Yet, the Communists did not invent *dazibao*: the medium had been used since imperial times to disseminate public edicts. However, it experienced a major rebirth as a form of communication during the 1942 Rectification campaign in Yan’an and was then used on a much larger scale during the Hundred Flowers period (Poon 1978: 189). Amid the continual political shifts of the Cultural Revolution, *dazibao* became the most effective medium of political dissemination, one that lent itself to last-minute updates often necessitated by political fluctuations and that was often used to spark political unrest.

A visitor from Yugoslavia recorded his visual impression of the ubiquitous presence of *dazibao* at the National University in Beijing during the late 1950s:

All the walls of the numerous buildings of the university, inside and out, were hung with posters as high as a man could reach! In front of the buildings, there were racks on which posters hung. Every corridor was decorated with posters. Strings were stretched across the corridors from one wall to the other, with posters hanging from them like laundry hung to dry. You had to stoop in order to pass under them as you walked along the corridors. (in Yu 1964: 138).

As suggested by this quotation and visual documents of the early years of the Cultural Revolution (fig. 1), *dazibao*’s presence was ubiquitous:



Figure 1: From *Hong taiyang zhaoligangle Dazhai qianjin de daolu* (The red sun shines over the progressive road of Dazhai) (Beijing: Waiwen, 1969).



words, often inspiring violence, were plastered on all available surfaces, graphically reminding the beholder of the obsessive reverberation of political authority.

Godwin Chu (1972: 20) has remarked how in the confused political situation of the time, "*dazibao* served an important cognitive function by clarifying the norms, by spelling out the do's and don'ts." While the use and the legitimization of this form of communication was initiated from the top down, eventually it came to perpetuate itself through a continuous exchange of criticism and counter-criticism at the grassroots level. As Chu observes (1977: 236), "*Dazibao* have been used as a means of exposing conflict because of their snowballing effect. Once a *dazibao* is posted, others tend to follow, reinforcing and supporting each other, until a public mood is created." To justify the state of continuous mass struggle that had become the Cultural Revolution's *raison d'être*, *dazibao* would generate the prerogatives for renewed criticism from readers, who would be inspired by the texts to take up the brush and write more.<sup>12</sup> *Dazibao* would connect the masses and the leadership in a circular form and would offer a possible venue for the release of pent-up emotions by creating the illusion of an outlet for grievances. It was a medium that postulated its continuous replication within the symbolic structure at its core.

### Pictures Within Pictures, Texts Above Texts

The Huxian painting *The Old Party Secretary* (Lao shuji) by the peasant painter Liu Zhide exemplifies how during the Cultural Revolution images were used as models for correct behavior and how the visualization of certain actions could become a template for others (fig. 2). This painting, subsequently reproduced as a poster, belongs to the subgenre of peasant paintings produced in the Hu Country commune and that was famously extolled by the propaganda system of the Cultural Revolution<sup>13</sup>—a subgenre that was the subject of a large exhibition held in Beijing in October 1973 that eventually toured many Western countries.<sup>14</sup> It depicts an old and

<sup>12</sup> "There is enough evidence to suggest that in an organized *tazepao* campaign, practically everybody, except the very young and the very old, is asked to take part" (Chu 1977: 232).

<sup>13</sup> Three of the images discussed in this article belong to the category of peasant paintings produced in Hu County and widely celebrated as models by Mao's wife, Jiang Qing. The iconographical feature that is the focus of my discussion, however, is found in many Cultural Revolution posters. See Landsberger 2003: 39, 125, 223, 238, 275; Landsberger 2009: 43, 98, 114. On reading and writing *dazibao*, see also Han Lei: 2006, lots 395, 415, 419, 429, 490. It is nonetheless true that the iconographical strategy I discuss in this essay appears to have been used more frequently in the last few years of the Cultural Revolution.

<sup>14</sup> The exhibition included 179 paintings. On the Hu Country Painting Exhibition, see Hsin Wen (1973). On peasant paintings, see Laing 1984 and 1988: 83–84; and Galikowski 1998: 155–158.

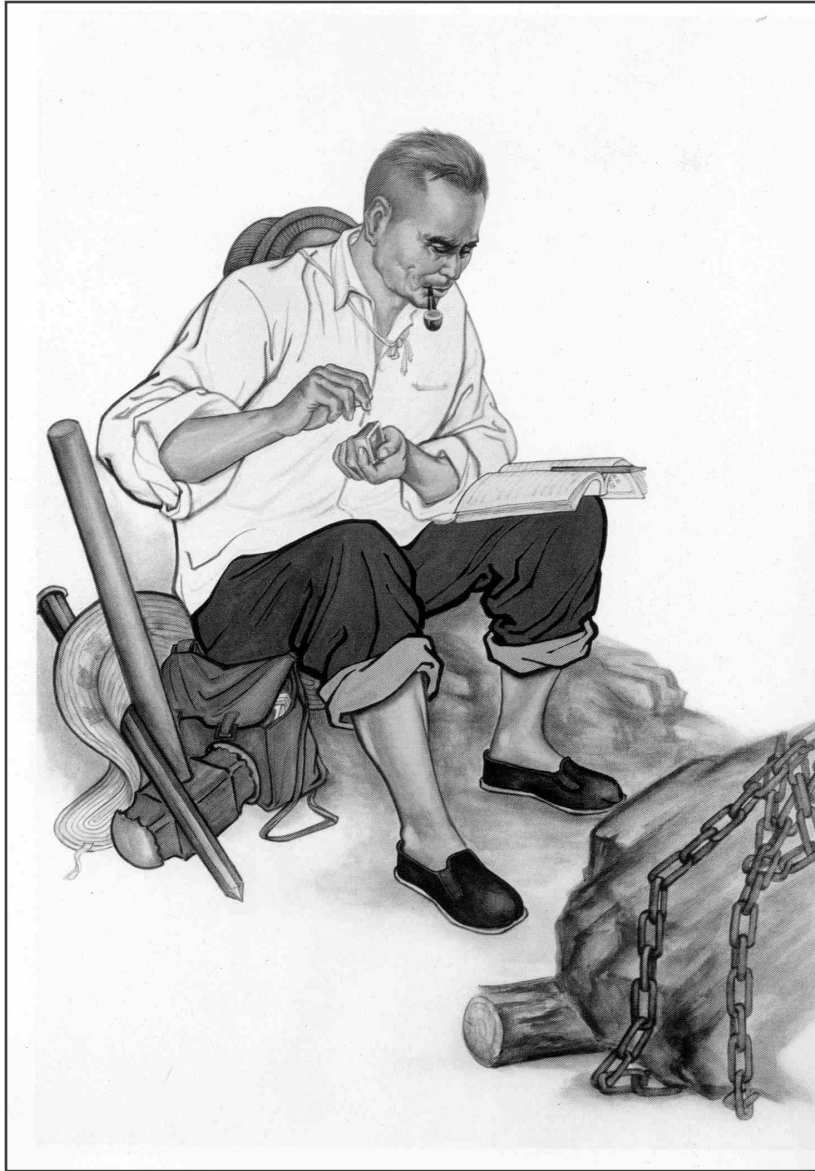


Figure 2: Liu Zhide, *The Old Party Secretary* (1973), gouache on paper, Guowuyuan wenhuazu meishuzuopin zhengji xiaozu bian 1974: 14.

<sup>15</sup> *Herr Eugen Dühring's Revolution in Science*, also known as *Anti-Dühring*, originally published in Germany in 1878, was Friedrich Engels's most popular contribution to the development of Marxist theory.

dedicated rural official studying and annotating political texts while taking a break from hard physical work. A contemporary article describes the value of this painting as an ideological model, both as a representation and as an artistic creation:

During a break in field work, the old Party secretary plunges deep into his reading of *Anti-Dühring*.<sup>15</sup> His unlit pipe and the forgotten match box held in one hand show the deep interest of this cadre at the grass-root level in the study of Marxist theory. Capturing a fleeting moment from the life of the typical character, the artist delineates his figure with strokes that are terse yet brings out fully both the Party secretary's diligent joining with commune members in labour and the political awareness which prompts him to make use of every free moment for study. Liu Chih-teh is acquainted with the life and thinking of many Party secretaries and has spent endless hours sketching from their life; this is the reason he could produce such a picture. (Hsin 1973: 96).

In a poster by Cheng Guoying titled *Model* (Bangyang) (fig. 3), exhibited in Beijing as part of the 1974 National Art Exhibition, which was organized on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China, a group of viewers is animatedly admiring *The Old Party Secretary*. *Model* visualizes the correct political behavior that ideal viewers should reenact: in the poster, *The Old Party Secretary* becomes a model for a group of peasants, one of whom seems to be a party official, judging from the books he holds and from his clothes, which resemble those worn by the cadre, at whom he stares with a smile, represented in the painting itself. This group seeks inspiration by looking at the represented archetype and then discusses its meaning.

Given the timeframe (the Hu County Painting exhibition opened in 1973, while the Twenty-fifth Anniversary exhibition opened in 1974), *The Old Party Secretary* would have been displayed in the same exhibition space where *Model* was later shown. Indeed, the architectural details visible in *Model* resemble the interior decoration of the China Art Gallery (Zhongguo



Figure 3: Cheng Guoying, *Model*. In 1974 *quanquo meishu zuopin zhanlanhui*, *Zhongguo hua, youhua mulu*. Tianjin: Renmin meishu, 52.

meishuguan), now the National Art Museum of China (NAMOC), where both exhibitions took place. Thus, visitors to the Twenty-fifth Anniversary

Exhibition who saw *Model* would have been looking at this poster from the same physical space represented within the picture itself. Such spatial association, in addition to the representation of the act of viewing, further reinforces the process of identification that the poster activates.

A second image that makes reference to *The Old Party Secretary* is a painting by the students Xu Xiangfei and Wu Jin on the cover of an album of artworks produced by middle-school Shanghai students and published in 1976. The album's title is the same as painting's: *To Study Painting One First Has to Study the Person in the Painting* (Xue hua xian xue huazhong ren) (fig. 4). This image portrays a student taking notes after having made a watercolor copy of Liu Zhide's original. The title and the representation reiterate the process of model formation, this time activated by the act of copying. As the title suggests, this process can take place in a correct manner only if the student is aware of the ideological position of the subject he



Figure 4: Xu Xiangfei and Wu Jin, *To Study Painting One First Has to Study the Person in the Painting*. In *Xue hua xian xue huazhong ren: Shanghai zhongxuesheng huaxuan*. Shanghai: Shanghai renmin, 1976, cover.

is sketching. In this case, producing a picture becomes a politically correct act signifying allegiance to the ideological system embodied by the image copied. When displayed to an audience, the act of painting or sketching thus becomes an additional endorsement of the necessity of emulating politically acceptable models.

The recurrence of this visual trope suggests the existence of a narrative strategy, whose visual and communicative implications are the focus of the following discussion.<sup>16</sup> The visual device just described could be termed “double representation”—the insertion into the surface image of an internal image that has been observed or responded to by a group of people. The resonance established between the surface image and the internal image is normally mediated by a group of individuals linking the two images formally and conceptually. As such, the final message delivered by the poster (surface image) is the product of the combination of the internal image and the effect of the image on the group of people who are observing it. By showing the correct, expected effect of one image (the internal one) on an audience, the surface image delivers a complete message about the correct actualization of a certain behavior.

Another Hu County painting, subsequently reproduced as a poster, titled *Women Hold Up Half of the Sky* (Funü neng ding banbian tian) by Cheng Minsheng (fig. 5), exemplifies this strategy. In this image, a group of women stands before a commune *dazibao* wall, reading and heatedly commenting on the texts plastered around a poster depicting a woman delivering a public speech.<sup>17</sup> The larger slogan on the top of the wall reads, “Smash a thousand years’ shackles, women can hold half of the sky.” Other slogans proclaim, “The doctrine of Mencius and Confucius is a doctrine of exploitation of women” and “Thoroughly criticize Confucius’s false theory of women’s subjugation.”<sup>18</sup> Exemplifying the gamut of professions opened up to them by the new social conditions under socialism, a group of emancipated women is shown reading and discussing these slogans. These women include a tractor driver, a postwoman delivering neatly arranged

<sup>16</sup> For other visual examples, please see the references in note 13.

<sup>17</sup> All of the Hu County images discussed are published in *Guowuyuan wenhuazu meishu zuopin zhengji xiaozu bian* 1974.

<sup>18</sup> Other slogans include, “Women are the decisive power of revolutionary victory” and “Lin Biao and Old Confucius are the mortal enemies of working women.” The slogan on the back poster states, “Relentlessly criticize the Confucian theory of ‘Abide to the rites to the point of self-abnegation’” (*keji fuli*).



Figure 5: Cheng Minsheng, *Women Hold up Half of the Sky*, in *Guowuyuan wenhuazu meishu zuopin zhengji xiaozu bian* 1974: 37.

bunches of *Criticize Confucius and Lin Biao* texts, a barefoot doctor, an electrician, a student holding some papers, and a peasant carrying a pick. The two men standing by the poster wall are intently, but passively, reading the texts on the walls and not interacting with the empowered female figures, suggesting a gender-related division of labor that highlights the active roles of women in socialist society. The focus of the crowd in the foreground is the older woman, who is haranguing the group with what is probably an account of her harsh experiences as a female in the old society. Her stance creates a direct visual comparison and an ideological juxtaposition with the figure of the empowered young woman in the poster on the wall, a strategy that highlights the difference between past exploitation and present emancipation.

With its use of bright colors, dark lines, and apparent lack of anatomical accuracy in the representation of the human figures, this “peasant” poster displays a sophisticated composition that generates the illusion of telescopic recession into the pictorial space. The viewer’s eye is drawn back into this space by a zigzagging wall that connects the image of the tractor in the foreground to the group of men in the background, who are reading another wall of *dazibao*. This type of composition, which is often seen in Cultural Revolution imagery, allows for the cramming together of multiple elements and narratives in a format reminiscent of a hanging scroll (Liu 1971: 114). The strategy of organizing a densely populated natural or human landscape into an orderly system where every element fits logically, most often in a vertical composition reminiscent of the hanging scroll format, is often used to symbolize an utopian social order where the “people” live in harmony and prosperity.<sup>19</sup> In the case of this particular poster, the composition creates a visual and conceptual link between the foreground and the background, while the wheels of the tractor, seemingly straddling the pictorial space and the real space that the viewer inhabits, facilitate the viewer’s access *into* the space of the picture.

This poster creates the illusion of three coexisting spaces, reinforcing

<sup>19</sup> For other examples, see Landsberger 2009: 144, 176, 187. This composition is often employed in the peasant painting genre. See Guowuyuan wenhuazu meishu zuopin zhengji xiaozu bian 1974: 1, 11, 18–19.



<sup>20</sup> On political propaganda campaigns directly conceived for women, see Yu 1964: 27–29.

the efficacy of the first statement on the top of the wall. “Smash a thousand years’ shackles, women can hold half of the sky.” As in the case of *Model*, these are (1) the space occupied by the woman represented in the poster on the wall, which is viewed by and commented on by (2) the figures standing before the wall, who in turn are observed by (3) the viewer outside of the pictorial frame.<sup>20</sup> The function of the figures reading the texts on the wall is to endorse visually the messages expressed by these texts and to embody the new opportunities opened up to women in the new society. The poster thus includes within its frame both theory and the application of theory: in other words, it presents a political policy whose results are directly visualized. Moreover, it suggests a circular effect of viewing: the viewer of the painting reenacts the model of viewing represented inside the pictorial frame. In a sense, we could go so far as to say that the poster requires from the viewer a replication of the act represented in the picture: he or she is expected to take up the same ideological position of the group of people represented within.

<sup>21</sup> Huxian nongming huaxuan ji 1974: 11. A similar image is to be found on page 16, but in this case we see the readers from the back reading a flat *dazibao* wall.

Another example of this strategy is a third Huxian painting, by Yang Zhixian, titled *An Exhibition to Criticize Lin Biao and Confucius* (Pi Lin pi Kong zhanlanhui) (fig. 6).<sup>21</sup> In this painting, also subsequently reproduced as a poster, the act of reading *dazibao* is presented in multiple variations within the framework of the same image. Several layers of texts and figures are juxtaposed in a traditional bird’s-eye view of a commune plaza, in which partitions are inventively arranged to give the viewer the opportunity to observe the faces and expressions of the people reading the texts on the banners of the curtains in the lower half of the composition. The image thus represents a reading extravaganza, with texts intently devoured in every section of the composition: the banner hanging above the gate, the curtains of *dazibao* hung around the perimeter of the square, the *dazibao* pasted on the front and back of the wall at the entrance to the exhibition, and the texts in the central area of the theater stage.

This obsessive reiteration of the act of reading is intimately



Figure 6: Yang Zhixian, *An Exhibition to Criticize Lin Biao and Confucius*, in *Guowuyuan wenhuazu meishu zuopin zhengji xiaozu bian* 1974: 11.

associated with the power assigned to words in the formation of a mass movement:

Anyone who has not lived through a mass movement in Communist China can hardly feel the power of words when backed up by the power of the party-state. For it is words that incite the people to action; it is slogans uttered by the men on top and echoed by the propaganda machine that start what is often described in the Communist press as the “tidal waves” or the “conflagration that reaches the sky.” (Hsia 1963: 3)

Instead of taking the role of a mere commentary printed as a slogan on its external margin, the texts included within the poster’s pictorial space are imbued with a more potent didactic function, with an aura of authenticity, by being featured within the frame of the image: not only can we read the texts on the walls, but we can also observe the power of such words on the focused expressions of the readers’ faces.

### **Picturing the Act of Writing**

Another iconographical instance of the double reference established between images and texts within the space of a picture is the representation of the act of writing. The highest validation of such practice is that provided personally by Mao Zedong, often represented as a figure who inscribes political texts or poems with a brush or as an author of a *dazibao*, as in the poster *Follow Closely Mao’s Great Strategic Plans* (Jin’gen Mao zhuxi weida zhanlue buzhi; 1968) (fig. 7).<sup>22</sup> But during the Cultural Revolution, the representation of the practice of writing was often associated with individuals who were traditionally excluded from literacy, such as women and peasants, who are transformed into iconic symbols of emancipation through this correlation. In the poster *Rough Hands Want to Transmit the Truth* (Cu shou yao ba zhenli chuan) by commune member Song Enmin, for example, an older man, seemingly a blacksmith, writes on a blackboard in

<sup>22</sup> I have been unable to find information about the original publication of this poster. The poster is reproduced in Laing 1988: fig. 71; and Galibrowski 1998: fig. 14. The same image of Mao holding a brush has also been reproduced under the title *Bombarding the Headquarters* (Paoda silingbu).



Figure 7: *Follow Closely Mao's Great Strategic Plan*, Anonymous (1968), in Galikowski 1998: n.p., fig. 14.

a simple calligraphic style, "Only socialism can save China" (fig. 8).<sup>23</sup>

Another revealing example of the representation of the act of writing *dazibao* is the poster *War Drums Speed Up the Coming of Spring* (Zhan gu cui chun; 1977) by commune member Han Baoku (fig. 9).<sup>24</sup> This poster portrays commune workers and mechanics busily composing, writing, and pasting *dazibao* on the walls of a factory's courtyard. Slogans on the wall include, "One cannot reverse the verdict of the public will" and "Bring the counterattack struggle against 'Right-deviationist revisionism' to the end." Similar to the obsessive representation of the act of reading in *An Exhibition to Criticize Lin Biao and Confucius*, the performance of the act of writing is represented through visual repetition. We see people composing while kneeling on the ground, sitting on or leaning against tractors, and standing. Characters are being written on vertical scrolls, small pieces of paper, and large sheets of paper pasted on a wall. Almost every character is holding or touching paper of some sort. The mature man in the central group—whose older age is indicated by his beard and glasses—has just removed his glasses to evaluate his freshly accomplished feat, signified by

<sup>23</sup> Published in 1977 *Nianhua suoyang, dier pi*, this image is reproduced in a catalogue of posters apparently intended to provide samples to possible distributors (posters were normally sold in bookshops). The catalogue bears the *tongyi shuhao* (unified publication number) 8090–887. Other instances of the representation of the act of writing can be found in Landsberger 2009: 127, 154, 190, 204, 211.

<sup>24</sup> 1977 *Nianhua suoyang, dier pi*.



Figure 8: Song Enmin, *Rough Hands Want to Transmit the Truth* (1977), from 1977 *Nianhua suoyang, dier pi*.



Figure 9: Han Baoku, *War Drums Speed Up the Coming of Spring* (1977), in *1977 Nianhua suoyang, dier pi*.

the brush still in his hand, while three other people around him intently appraise his work: a woman with an ink bucket and a roll of paper under her arm, looking as if she is about to start her own composition; a younger woman squatting on the ground and completing a series of characters to be hung as a banner; and a young man copying the text in a notebook. Every person in this poster is engaged in some way in the acts of writing or reading, as if these acts, not the proper operation of the factory, were his

or her main responsibility. The most interesting fact is that they all observe these written texts with the admiration and attention that we normally associate with the observation of an image. Indeed, the detailed rendering of this group of four, with the main “author” taking a short break from his work, seeking the advice of his senior female colleague whose status as an expert is indicated by the roll of paper she holds under her arm and the bucket of ink she holds in her hand, exemplifies a level of scrutiny normally associated in Western visual culture with the act of looking at a painting. Moreover, in this poster, the inclusion in the lower left of the composition of a canvas-like board seen only from the back recalls a device often used in Western art to visualize the practice of painting: the representation of a picture within a picture. In this instance, however, this device is used to represent the act of writing a text. That the board in the foreground is to be used for writing characters and not a painting is proved by the incongruous detail of the younger woman who squats on the ground and composes a text out of single characters written on individual pieces of paper. Even the presence of the wet brush and the board is not enough to attest to the fact that the older man is *writing*, the characters scattered on the ground offer further proof, as well as a clue as to the content of the text. Why does the poster emphasize the act of writing a *dazibao*? Why does the act of creating a *dazibao* and looking at a poster need to become the theme of another poster?

In “Allegory and Iconography in Socialist Realist Painting,” Wolfgang Holz (1993) introduces the concept of “dream theater”—a semiotic device found in Soviet art that resonates with the strategies discussed in this essay with respect to Chinese art. According to Holz, this strategy is related to the literary device of the *mise-en-abyme*:

the effect of “mirroring” the viewer inside the picture both in order to manipulate the viewer’s processes of perception and to represent the viewer as a fictional “actor” inside a particular scene. This aesthetic method—enlarging the viewer’s psyche by inducing

him into different realities of consciousness while simultaneously turning the act of viewing itself into a visual “ritual”—is found in almost all Socialist Realist pictures.<sup>25</sup>

In Western art, the *mise-en-abyme* is in some cases signaled by the inclusion of the image of a mirror in the picture, where the mirror allows for an enlargement of the field of vision presented to the viewer by revealing details that lie outside the pictorial frame. In short, the mirror allows the viewer to see what is taking place on our side of the picture, as well as to include the ideal viewer and/or maker of the work within the space of the picture. In using this formal strategy, the artist has the potential to integrate the viewer into the ritualistic significance of the composition. A famous example is the celebrated painting *Las Meninas* (1656) by Diego Velázquez, in which King Philip IV and Queen Mariana are portrayed in the mirror visible behind the shoulders of the painter, who is looking in the direction of the viewer and toward the subjects of his painting—the king and queen.<sup>26</sup>

As provocative as the juxtaposition of *Las Meninas* and a Cultural Revolution poster such as *War Drums Speed Up the Coming of Spring* may sound, and conscious of the massive cultural differences between these two pictures, I would like to draw some formal comparisons. Both pictures focus on the process of the production of a visual artifact: a painting in the case of Velázquez and a political *dazibao* in the case of Han Baoku. The creator represented in each respective picture is portrayed as pausing in the act of creation, beholding his work while holding a brush in his hand. Whereas Velázquez stands to the side of the composition and is partially obscured by dim light, the bespectacled author of the *dazibao* stands in the center, a protagonist surrounded by secondary characters, in harmony with the compositional principle of *san tuchu* (three prominences).<sup>27</sup> The two pictures share a telescopic representation of space, the main formal difference being that the scene represented in the painting lies at the viewer’s eye level, whereas the scene represented in the poster is portrayed

<sup>25</sup> Holz (1993: 77), adding, “Art under centralized communism not only acted as a set of pseudo-religious allegories but also fulfilled ritual functions by integrating the viewer (and the mass to which he or she belonged) into the painting.”

<sup>26</sup> “The optical illusion sought in all these pictures, lies in bringing into the painting items that (fictively) are outside of it” (Dällenbach 1989: 12).

<sup>27</sup> The principle of *santuchu* (three prominences) was a narrative and compositional structure applied to model operas that then came to influence most cultural production of the time. It is based on different levels of “contrasts” or “prominence”: between positive people and heroes, and the heroes and the main protagonist. See Galikowski 1998: 165.



from a bird's-eye view looking over the figures.

In his article "*Las Meninas* and the Mirror of the Prince," Joel Snyder (1985: 543) remarks how by looking at *Las Meninas*, "we, as viewers are forced to position ourselves imaginatively in relation to the scene shown in the painting." In both pictures, a sense of intimate proximity with the subject is suggested by details such as the inclusion of the back of the canvas, in the case of the painting, and of the back of the board, in the case of the poster. Through this device, the two pictures share the strategy of including the viewer within the act of artistic creation by assigning him or her the role of witness to this process. Moreover, in both pictures, we behold the act of creating a visual artifact that we *do not see*.

With respect to Han Baoku's image of *dazibao* writing, I would push Snyder's argument further by suggesting that by being drawn into the act of creation in this manner, the viewer becomes the artist's accomplice. The board divides those who perform the act of writing from those who observe this act, but at the same time the viewer is alerted to his or her position and is invited to participate. From this perspective, the viewer is thus transformed into an active element of the narrative: a protagonist who is in the act of watching a *dazibao* being written, intimately drawn into the process and forced into a familiarity, perhaps even intimacy, with the represented act of writing. This imaginary participation facilitates the viewer's self-identification, fostering the illusion that he or she is standing right beside the creator, ready to hand him a brush or a bucket of ink or to take up the brush to participate in the writing frenzy.

### **Conclusion**

In all of the images discussed in this essay, a circular movement is created between the object of the representation and the viewer through the depiction in the surface image of the anticipated effects of the textual and visual messages in the work. In *Women Hold Up Half of the Sky*, an analogy is created between the women looking at the wall and the woman

represented in the poster on the wall: this process then snowballs to include the viewer of the surface image. Similarly, in *Model* and *To Study Painting*, the replication—either by viewing or copying—of the model provided by *The Old Party Secretary* initiates the process of drawing the viewer into the ideological space of the picture.

In *The Mirror in the Text*, Lucien Dällenbach mentions how in *Las Meninas*,

by showing the people the painter is looking at, and also, the people who are looking at him, Velasquez's painting achieves a reciprocity of contemplation that creates an oscillation between the interior and the exterior, making the image "come out of the frame" while inviting the visitors to enter the picture. (Dällenbach 1989: 11, my emphasis)

While there is no mirror in Han Baoku's poster, I would like to argue that the *reciprocity of contemplation* created between the group of people looking at the unfinished *dazibao* and the viewer looking at the surface image achieves the effect of "inviting the visitors to enter the picture." Conscious of her or his status both as beholder and collaborator, the viewer is brought to a threshold in which the boundaries between reality and representation blur. Cultural Revolution posters incorporating this strategy would aim at drawing viewers into the utopian dimension of these images, very much as in the episode of the film *Mary Poppins* when Mary jumps with the children into the painting created by Bert on the pavement at the entrance of a park and begins another adventure on the other side of the painting surface.

Stefan Landsberger describes the use of models in the propaganda strategies of the Chinese Communist Party as promoting a process of behavioral perfecting that recalls the spiraling movement of these messages. In both Confucian and Marxist theory, a model has the function of stimulating the viewer toward emulation by juxtaposing his or her

individual values with the ideal values embodied by the model:

The struggle between the two value systems leads to a new equilibrium, in which the new values are internalized. The process does not stop there because, when confronted with a new model, the equilibrium gives way to a new internal contradiction. In this way, an eternal cycle of confrontation, internalizations and renewed confrontation is created, leading to ever-higher levels of human perfection or social development.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Landsberger 1995: 26. He adds (27) that models are “conveyor belts” that “should pass on officially-sanctioned information to the masses.”

By employing a mirror effect of the way good revolutionary citizens should perform and the use they should make of Maoist ideology, these representations might push the individual to “ever-higher levels of human perfection or social development.”

Finally, it remains to be asked: did these representations succeed in creating a sense of identification between the viewer and the represented subject? And who should we consider their ideal viewer to be, anyway? With such an expected tight coincidence of words and images, would not the messages propagated by these posters risk becoming self-defeating? Would not the inevitable comparison of such “perfection” with a less-than-perfect reality underline the fissure between what could be represented and what, in fact, could not?

W. J. Mitchell (1994: 65) also discusses the phenomenon in Western art of “talking metapictures”—images that include language within the frame—which provide “a representation of the relation between discourse and representation, a picture about the gap between word and pictures.” He suggests that the presence of a text within a picture underlines a gap between pictures and texts: “words cannot properly signify in a picture, they remain alien to its semiotic order no matter how firmly they are located in its pictorial space” (66). While the reference he provides is based on Western works accompanied by texts in a Western language, and thus is different in many respects from the characters inscribed within and below the posters of the Cultural Revolution, I believe that

his argument on the slippery relationship between texts and images can apply to all cultures. By presenting the immediate visualization of the perfected effects of the slogans depicted on walls or on banners, images such as *Women Hold Up Half of the Sky* and *War Drums Speed Up the Coming of Spring* may eventually signal the impossibility of their ideal implementation in the everyday life of the viewer exactly because of the apparently perfect comparison between the “interior” and “exterior” of the image on display.

This leads back to the question about the expected audience for these posters: while the immediate recipients and evaluators would be Party officials in charge of propaganda, the final product was aimed at an urban audience, who from the perspective of the city could then be convinced to participate in the spiraling movement activated by posters. In regard to Soviet propaganda posters, Victoria Bonnell has remarked that “however powerful and persuasive these images may have been, however shrewdly they incorporated popular mythologies, viewer’s responses were unpredictable because visual representations are inherently polyvalent” (Bonnell 1997: 14). It would be revealing, though difficult, to reconstruct at least some viewers’ responses to these posters. This would provide an extremely interesting perspective on the power of images to shape minds in this particularly intense historical moment. What I propose in this essay is just a possibility, one of the many fascinating assumptions that could be drawn about this still largely untapped visual material. More research and fewer prejudices are direly needed in this respect.

## Glossary

<i>Bangyang</i>	榜样
Cheng Minsheng	程敏生
Cheng Guoying	程国英
<i>Cu shou yao ba zhenli chuan</i>	粗手要把真理传
dazibao	大字报
<i>Funü neng ding ban biantian</i>	妇女能顶半边天
Han Baoku	韩宝库
<i>Jingen Mao zhuxi weida de zhanlüe buzhi</i>	紧跟毛主席伟大的战略布局
keji fuli	克己复礼
<i>Lao shuji</i>	老书记
Liu Zhide	刘志德
<i>Paoda silingbu</i>	炮打司令部
<i>Pi Lin pi Kong zhanlanhui</i>	批林批孔展览会
san tuchu	三突出
Song Enmin	宋恩民
Wu Jin	吴进
Xu Xiangfei	许翔飞
<i>Xue hua xian xue huazhong ren</i>	学画先学画中人
Yang Zhixian	杨志贤
<i>Zhan gu cui chun</i>	战鼓催春

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