

Politicalizing Art in Mao and Post-Mao Era

by

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in the Department of
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2020

ABSTRACT

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Abstract

As Carlos Ginzburg pointed out, “What is much harder to reject in principle (but also as much harder and more laborious to achieve) is an analytical reconstruction of the intricate web of minute relations that underlies the production of any work of art, however simple”¹, my project will zoom in the process of visualization of the socialist China and post-socialist China from a cultural-microhistorical perspective—propaganda poster, stamp and philately, political pop art—to figure out the continuity and discontinuity of this process, and the relations of art and politics. In a micro level, the trajectory of this thesis will follow the discussion of the visualization history of socialist China and post-socialist China, and the relation between art and politics in Mao and post-Mao era. Rather than simply using the visual analysis as main research method, based on the primary archives and secondary resources, I will choose artwork, art collector, and artist as the three typical cases with different research methodologies, including iconography, gender studies, etc. From discussing the propaganda posters’ positive and negative influences to political movements in 1950s and 1960s (Section 2), further to the complicated roles of stamp collector and how it embedded with official and individual discourses in 1960s and 1970s (Section 3), finally to the mislabeled political pop art of Wang Guangyi’s work in 1980s and 1990s (Section 4), this thesis aims

¹ Ginzburg Carlo. *The Enigma of Piero: Piero Della Francesca*. New with appendices. ed. London: Verso, 2000.

to offer a possible way to understand the politicalizing art process in modern Chinese history.

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1. Introduction

There are two basic modes to represent things, events, persons and deeds that are absent because they have already passed: by text and by picture. What is the difference between them? The default answer to this question according to classical tradition says that representation by text is conventional: there is no similarity between words, sentences, texts and the objects represented by them. Representation by picture is based on the similarity between the picture and the objects depicted. Therefore, picture is a more “natural” mode of representation than text¹.

—Zenonas Norkus

There has been too much talk, to be sure, of interdisciplinary research (which has not, in most cases, led to much practical result); nevertheless, there is obviously every reason why historians and art historians should collaborate, each deploying their own techniques and their expertise, in order to arrive together at a deeper understanding of the evidence given by figurative works².

—Carlo Ginsburg

“What we initially call history is nothing more than a narrative”³ written by Michel de Certeau. The problematic of history writing causes my interest in reflecting several questions, such as how to construct a history about our past in what literary form, and what narrative we can adopt to zoom into the picture of our past. These questions promote me encountering with the deconstruction theorists, including Hayden White. During this process, there is an interesting metaphor, which is suggested by the historian Gail Hershatter, caught my eyes. She describes the process of writing history as one of peeling an onion, which produces no essential core but rather changing shapes under layer after layer of investigation, while all the while the historian falls

¹ Norkus Zenonas. *Historical Narratives as Pictures: On Elective Affinities between Verbal and Pictorial Representations*. *Journal of Narrative Theory*. 2004, (34) 173-206.

² Ginsburg Carlo. *The Enigma of Piero: Piero Della Francesca*. New with appendices. ed. London: Verso, 2000.

³ Certeau Michel D. *The Writing of History*. New York: Columbia University Press. 1988.

under the spell of its smell. This metaphor is more or less pessimistic about the possibility of historical writing in approaching to the past, indicating history is trapped in a non-meaningful black hole. It is at this point Fredric Jameson's Hegelian Marxism in the reconstruction of history gives me some hope in continuing the research. As he pointed out in *The Political Unconsciousness*, "History—Althusser's 'absent cause', Lacan's "Real"—is not a text, for it is fundamentally non-narrative and non-representational; what can be added, however, is the proviso that history is inaccessible to us except in textual form"⁴. Thus, no matter how suspicious we are towards the history writing, even towards the possibility of history studies in literary form, we must say that narrative is the unavoidable tool we have to use in approaching to history. Furthermore, these inquiries pull us back to reflect our pre-assumptions and our methodologies. History thus stop to be described in a homogenous and grand narrative, more and more alternative history writing becomes possible, such as the history writing in visual art form.

To put these questions and reflection in Chinese history context, I was especially interested in the visualization history of socialist China and post-socialist China, and the intertwined relationship of art and politics in Mao and Post-Mao era. In Gail Hershatter's article "Disquiet in the House of Gender" she has an interesting comment

⁴ Jameson Fredric. *Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. London: Routledg, 2002.

on the function of fantasy in the Chinese Revolution⁵. On the one hand, Hershatter recognizes that fantasy by nature is the opposite of a rational accounting of history; on the other hand, she points out that, as “a powerful constituent of any revolution,” fantasy “opens up imaginative political possibilities” and thus is indispensable as an imaginative conceptualization. In my opinion, such a paradoxical function of fantasy—or, should we say, ideology and utopia—might be a critical perspective to re-examine the Chinese Revolution, even Chinese history. Regarding socialist and post-socialist China as a continuation process, my project will try to nullify the two fixed conclusions that are drawn from a bipolar position. In Hershatter’s terms, one conclusion claims that the Chinese Revolution and socialist China and its effect as “a nasty and needless mistake”, while the other one narrates it as a “totalizing story of heroic revolution”. Instead of disposing the object into some ready-made accounts, I then argue that a new direction in studying the history writing of China in Mao and Post-Mao era—should aim to expand the scope of investigation. My project will zoom in the process of visualization of the socialist China and post-socialist China from a cultural-microhistorical perspective—propaganda poster, stamp and philately, political pop art—to figure out the continuity and discontinuity of this process, and the relations of art and politics.

⁵ Hershatter Gail. *Disquiet in the House of Gender*. *The Journal of Asian Studies* 71. 2012, (4) 873-894.

1.1 Propaganda Poster

In Chinese academic circles, scholars have seldom studied the propaganda poster; only a few articles on this topic are published every year. Existing studies mainly concentrate on propaganda posters in the Mao Zedong Era, especially the posters on the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. They therefore lack comparative analysis of the political metaphor and national discourse of the propaganda posters during the Mao and post-Mao era. In addition, most studies adopt image-analysis methods, and provide little in-depth discussion of the social and political context of propaganda posters⁶. In contrast, there is a wealth of western studies that explore the

⁶ Chinese scholarship on the study of political propaganda can be divided into two categories. The first category is a general introduction of propaganda poster in Modern Chinese art history. Zou Yuejin's *"The New China Art History in 1949-2000"* mainly focuses on the New Year's paintings on the popular art of 17 years. His discussion of propaganda paintings mainly focuses on the "1966-1976" Cultural Revolution. Chen Lusheng systematically discussed the important node of the development of propaganda paintings in the 17th year of the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949-1966. Among them, Section 3 "New Year Painting and New Year Painting Creation Movement" and Section 7 "Popularization and Improvement" respectively discuss the important historical facts of the development of New Year paintings, comic strips, caricatures and posters, and other sections also refer to propaganda paintings. Pan Gongkai's *"The Road to Modern Chinese Art: Consciousness and the Four Major Concept"* opened up a theoretical space for the study of propaganda paintings and provided a reasonable theoretical framework for juxtaposition of popular art and other plastic arts. The book summarizes the development path of Chinese modern art since the 20th century with "traditionalism, integrationism, Westernism, and popularism". Popularism is represented by the "year, company, and propaganda" since the founding of the People's Republic. Lu Peng's *"The History of Chinese Art in the 20th Century"* in *"The Art of Socialist Construction and the Cultural Revolution: 1949-1976"* takes the political intervention art as the starting point, and reviews the art creation activities of 1951-1958, which involves propaganda painting. Other general history writings of the history of Chinese art in New China are also accompanied by posters, which need not be enumerated here. Another type of work is thematic research on propaganda poster. For example, Zou Yuejin's *"Mao Zedong Times Art (1942-1976)"*, in addition to the historical narrative in the introduction, the classification of images in the text breaks down the linear chronologic of art history writing. In Chinese scholarship, works that focus on poster art are often included in the history of design, and propaganda posters appear as posters in such works. For example, in Zhu Guoqin's *"History of Modern Posters"*, in the sixth section *"Development of Poster Design in Post-war Countries"*, the Chinese political propaganda posters are introduced as an emergent genre of poster design. The important of the book lies in the use the propaganda poster as a form of modern poster, juxtaposed with

Chinese propaganda posters as a whole; however, they mainly focus on those propaganda posters concerning the two world wars and the Soviet Union⁷. Based on new interpretations created by previous scholars⁸, which explored propaganda posters alongside other subjects, I aim to introduce a new dimension into the discussion on political images and visual art in socialist Mao era, thus exploring the visualization history of socialist China. From close-reading women's image in poster, Section 2 will

other modern poster genres. Apart from this, its systematic comparative analysis of the Soviet and Polish propaganda genres also helps to examine the impact of these two countries on the development of the 17th year of propaganda. Zheng Lijun's *Scene and Image 1st, 20th Century Chinese Poster Art* is also a study of the development of poster art in China from the perspective of design history. The book examines the development of Chinese poster art from the 1920s to the end of the 20th century, including the poster from Shanghai commercial posters to business advertisement posters in the 1980s and 1990s.

⁷ Influenced by the Marxist historian Hobsbawm's book *The Traditional Invention*, Victoria E. Bonnell systematically studied the evolution of two consecutive period propaganda paintings in *Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Posters Under Lenin and Stalin*. Compared to Bonaire's writing, another book on the propaganda art studies is more popular—*Art and Propaganda in the Twentieth Century: The Political Image in the Age of Mass Culture* by Toby Clark, which includes different kinds of propaganda from all over the world. Indeed, it is obvious that western scholarship on Chinese propaganda paintings is mainly published in the form of catalogues, which also based on certain collections. For example, originally published in Germany language, *Chinese Propaganda Posters from the Collection of Michael Wolf* is based on his own collection of Chinese propaganda. Lincoln Cushing's book *Chinese Posters: Art from the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution* also include the propaganda images from his own collection.

⁸ There are numerous domestic and foreign studies of iconography, which focus on the discussion of gender issues in images, and specifically, its implementation of political analysis through female images. For example, after comparing the iconography on the French Revolution and the 19th-century labor movements in Britain and France and that of the Soviet socialist, Eric Hobsbawm found that the latter gradually ruled out the female images⁸. Bonnell's research indicated that "Hobsbawm failed to take into account the allegorical and symbolic images of females that were widely used in early Soviet political artworks" The use of female images by the Soviets had some influence on the imagination and construction of Chinese female images by the CCP. Therefore, it is fair to say that Bonnell's research provides background knowledge for this paper. Overall, there are few domestic and overseas academic studies on the gender narrative of the Chinese political images (including pictorial posters and propaganda posters).

analyze the positive and negative influences of propaganda poster towards women's liberation movement, with the focus of one concept-state feminism⁹.

Especially, in Section 2, state feminism is explored through the study of propaganda posters and the facilitation of "state feminism" in the analysis of historical situations and the academic discussion. The relationship between national discourse and women's liberation discourse, literary films and even domestic promotion campaigns, female images, and physical female performances all reflect the same motif: State feminism is strongly present throughout the process of awakening female consciousness and gender liberation in China.

Generally speaking, the study of the characterization and reproduction of women by national discourse in different literary and artistic forms mainly focus on the following two aspects: first, conduct the analysis of gender dimensions, based on the Western feminist theory; and second, based on the male-female dualistic pattern, discussing gender issues from the perspective of anti-patriarchal criticism. In this study, the attempt is made to explore a third mode on the basis of the above two modes: the introduction of the gender perspective into the study of propaganda posters. The exploration of the neutralized female image is of positive significance to deconstruction,

⁹ "State feminism" is not a concept invented by this author. According to statistics provided by Jstor, 2 research reports, 19,553 book entries, and 76,678 article entries involve the concept of "state feminism". Although there is a wealth of research on "state feminism", scholars generally study it in accordance with their own research needs, and the basic characteristics of "state". As such, they have not reached a consensus on the definition of the concept of "state feminism". To a certain extent, "state feminism" is an open and flexible concept, which is conducive to academic expression in specific contexts.

because it can break through traditional views on patriarchy and matriarchy. In this way, the author expects to make a breakthrough in the views on woman and gender in the Chinese context. For example, Western feminists misread the neutralized female image, such as the "Iron Girl", during the Chinese socialist period. Some of them hold that "Iron Girl" is a completely positive image for women's liberation, because it symbolizes how women have become as powerful as men. Others deem the image of "Iron Girl" obfuscatory of femininity, and indicative of the androphany of females. Both views do not take into account the Chinese context. Therefore, as this example illustrates, it is necessary to consider the connotation of deconstruction of the neutralized female image under the Chinese context. In other words, unlike other literary and artistic works, in terms of their creative and historical values, the propaganda posters are based on the traditional imagination, and objectively create new space for the imagination and practice of females in the process of masculinizing, neutralizing and revolutionizing female images. Therefore, as an art form, the propaganda poster contains special feminist theoretical resources that demand to be excavated.

As for research material, more than 6,000 propaganda posters collected by Shanghai Propaganda Poster Art Center supply the material for image analysis, supplemented by related pictures in other collections of posters, newspapers, and art history works (see reference for specific sources). Based on knowledge of Chinese art

history in the 20th century, especially research on the developmental history of propaganda posters, I will try to avoid subjective misjudgment and presupposition in selecting and interpreting original materials. With regard to the specific research methods, this paper mainly has employed the literature review for the data collection, adopting the interdisciplinary research methods of iconography and feminism-Marxism to analyze the collected data¹⁰.

1.2 Stamp and Philately

Many historians often overlook postal operations in general¹¹. Specifically, many treat stamps as mere instruments, rather than objects deeply embedded in culture, with complicated stories to tell. However, stamps are truly informative, containing identifying signs to indicate the country of origin in words and/or symbols, the denomination in native currency, and a design that includes color, typography, and

¹⁰ It should be noted that it is difficult to figure out whether, as a medium, the propaganda poster reflects people's existing ideas or creates them. Therefore, it is very important to understand how people are shaped and how they are instilled with concepts related to gender from different perspectives. Additionally, as the target audiences of propaganda posters, it is worth studying the reaction of the masses. For example, we may examine suggestions of the salient themes and plots of the propaganda posters through views expressed by laborers in their letters to newspapers, publishing houses, and editorial departments. However, given the limits of this study, it is impossible to strike a perfect balance between depth and breadth for the relevant analysis, so I intend to carry out the casematic analysis with propaganda posters as specific objects.

¹¹ Due to the strong political meaning of Chinese stamps in socialist period (1950s-1970s, especially in Cultural Revolution), most Chinese scholarships avoid choosing stamps in this period for research. For English scholarships, most research about these socialist stamps was regarded as the "propaganda" of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which exclude possible alternative interpretations, research such as, Carlos Stoetzer, *Postage Stamps as Propaganda* (Washington: Public Affairs Press, 1953). Thus, it is not unusual to find that most research focus on stamps at post-socialist period for its business value or artistic design, whereas only a limited scholarships on stamps in Mao's regime, with its proclaiming the embedded political meaning of Chinese stamps, such as "Postage Stamps and Ideology in Communist China" by Jameson A. Leith in 1971.

imagery. These variables combined to present a vision of national identity. Especially, commemorative stamps function as a type of federal souvenir that when saved became miniature memorials. Susan Stewart sees a souvenir as an object that offers an incomplete vision of an event or place that it represents, thus requiring a new narrative that displaces the authentic experience. Stories on stamps are derivative narratives of historical events and biographies. As scholars of memory and memorialization¹² have stated, the institutionalization of memory in a society satisfies the needs of a nation or community at a given time. Often, the messages projected through a memorial's design such as stamps are contentious. According to Pierre Nora's interpretative frame of lieux de mémoire, "a place of memory", constitutes a symbolic entity that relates the physical place to the collective memory of the community, a place "where cultural memory crystallized and secretes itself". Although small in size, stamps' availability made them more accessible than other memorials, such as museums, archives, and monuments.

Stamp is more than a physical object with economic utility; it is a miniature artwork full of artistic value. It also functions as a way of building national imagination.

¹² Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire," *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989): 7-25. Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, 132-151. Stewart and Nora's definition draw upon the concept of a screen memory developed by Sigmund Freud. A screen memory stands in for an original unpleasant personal memory from the past in order to protect an individual as they live in the present. Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1948).

It is these multiple meanings that make it one of the most interesting visual forms in researching the visualization process of Chinese history—how art, politics, economic intertwined. In order to investigate the meaning of stamp, one must also examine the institution producing them and the ways in which people collect stamps. From designing, producing, selling to even collecting, stamp goes through a process where the CCP, artists/designers, printing workers, postal service and the ordinary people play a part, which are to be examined during this research.

One archive especially captures my interest in researching stamps and stamp collecting in China—*Jiyou* (集邮). Published in 1955, as an official philately journal, *Jiyou* plays a very instrumental role in instructing stamp collecting. The stamp images included in *Jiyou*, both domestically-produced stamps and stamps from other socialist countries, not only work as an advertisement to boost sales, but also a guideline about “what stamps are worth collecting” and “how should we—socialist citizen—react towards stamps from capitalist countries”. In other words, *Jiyou* influences the whole process including design, sale, and collection. Furthermore, in a journal form, *Jiyou* contains a huge number of articles from the editors, post services, artists, collectors, etc, which offers a possibility for presenting different discourses. In addition, considering this journal was under the censorship pressure to determine whether to publish an article or not, the complicated discourse itself reveals the political dynamic at that time.

All above makes *Jiyou* one of the most important databases for me to conduct my project.

Choosing stamps and stamps collecting as another topic to investigate the visualization of history in Mao and post-Mao era, it offers a possibility to re-examine socialist and post-socialist China from a cultural-microhistorical perspective. I intend to delve into the following questions, such as what specific historical topics chosen to be visualized in stamps, how the stamp collectors perceive the political information contained within production, and how *Jiyou* play a complicated role in influencing stamp-designing, stamp production, circulation and collection, etc. With the interpretative analysis of primary archive and theoretical reflection, Section 3 will analyze the underlying memory politics of Chinese stamp and stamp collecting, which hopefully can shed light on the visualization process of Chinese history and the relations of art and politics in a micro level.

1.3 Political Pop Art

From socialist China to post-socialist China, in Section 4, this thesis will focus on the political pop art to approaching to the visualization history in post-Mao era, with the goal of exploring the relation of art and politics. Especially, featuring the Chinese Cultural Revolution as main topic, I will choose Wang Guangyi's artworks as example for this research.

For most Chinese people, the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), as a political movement, was a disaster. Ironically, it is also Cultural Revolution which became the most abundant resources for artists to explore different ways to retell history again. Jiang Jiehong pointed out the importance of Cultural Revolution to Chinese contemporary art: "Indeed, without this particular reference, a great revolution that touches people to their very souls, one would have seen a completely different platform of contemporary art practice in China. The influence that an artist received from the experience can be very concrete to every single practice, including the style, the technical skills, the media and the manner of execution"¹³. A contemporary Chinese artist, Xu Bing, even claimed that "if one tries to distinguish contemporary art in mainland China from that in Hong Kong, Taiwan or other regions, the baptism of the Cultural Revolution would be the key"¹⁴. Considering this, it is not difficult to imagine the popularity of using political-historical images from Cultural Revolution in paintings. Wang Guangyi, whose artworks includes *Mao Zedong: AO* and *the Great Criticism* series, is one of the most representative contemporary Chinese artists in exploring Cultural Revolution in a creative way. Wang Guangyi's most famous artworks were created in 1980s and 1990s, which ignited an intense debate in academic circles about its popularity and significance in art history and culture studies.

¹³ Jiang Jiehong and Inc ebrary. *Burden or Legacy: From the Chinese Cultural Revolution to Contemporary Art*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press. 2007.

¹⁴ Kaye N and Bing X. *Cultural Transmissions. an Interview with Xu Bing*. Performance Research. 1998, (3) 44-51.

Generally speaking, the modern art movement of 1980s China remained confined by enlightenment thinking and idealism, while the 1990s enlightenment project of establishing subjectivity was met with confrontational attitudes. For political reason, in the 1990s Chinese society quickly completed its transformation from an enlightened culture to a consumer culture, and Chinese artists, still dramatically disturbed by the failure of cultural unfamiliar economic system. As Huang Zhuan once claimed the influence of transformed cultural background in 1990s, "The loss of ideals and critical identity left artists at the mercy of chaos, suspended between the constructive enlightenment of modernism and the opposing postmodern tendencies"¹⁵.

Therefore, all of this led to Pop Art in China being embraced as the natural choice of the time. However, it must bear in mind that, this acceptance of western Pop Art¹⁶ in China based on its pursuit in deconstructing the original images by constructing new meanings, which separate it from western Pop. Nevertheless, many critics still misread its potential meaning in different ways. Thus, based on the visual analysis of Wang's artworks, the close reading of interviews materials, and secondary scholarships,

¹⁵ Huang Zhuan. *Politics and Theology in Chinese Contemporary Art: Reflections on the Work of Wang Guangyi*. Milano: Skira. 2014.

¹⁶ According to Huang, "the Pop art that arose in post-war America had two distinct backgrounds, one in cultural history and one in art history. The first refers to the nourishment it garnered from the mass-popularization and utilitarian aesthetics tradition of American culture, and was a physical reaction to the fragmented, superficial, trivial consumer culture that emerged after the Second World War. The second established the rejection of the elitist styles of modernism such as Abstract Expressionism. Warhol's visit to China in the early 1980s, and most importantly Robert Rauschenberg's solo exhibitions in Beijing and Lhasa in 1985 initiated the spread of American Pop ideas". Huang Zhuan, "Wei Guangqing: yi zhong Lishi hua de Boqu Zhuyi" [Wei Guangqing: A Historicized Form of Pop], in *Zuo Tu You Shi* [Interplay of Images and History] (Guangdong: Lingnan Fine Arts Publishing House, 2007), 1.

Section 4 will analyze the complicated meanings embedded in Wang Guangyi's artworks. Especially, with the focusing on discussing the modernism and post-modernism question in 1980s Chinese art movement, this section will further promote the investigation of the visualization history of China in post-Mao era, and the continuation process of politicalizing art.

2. The Visible and Invisible Female: State Feminism in Chinese Propaganda Poster

Art and politics should serve for people¹.

—Mao Zedong

Continuous propaganda exceeds the individual's capacities for attention or adaptation and thus his capabilities of resistance. This trait of continuity explains why propaganda can indulge in sudden twists and turns².

—Jacques Ellul

2.1 Introduction

During the 20th century, the propaganda poster³ played an influential role in Chinese politics. Before the concept and theory of political communication were introduced into China, the Chinese Communist Party (hereinafter referred to as the "CCP") had been able to make full use of the poster as a medium to propagate its political messages. In fact, propaganda posters still play an active role in the social landscape of contemporary China. However, due to the changes in communication styles, people may feel that there are not as many posters as before. Nowadays, although fewer posters are found in public spaces, nevertheless, billboards, temporary fences around building sites, lightboxes, and shop windows have become the site and the

¹ Mao, Zedong. *Mao Zedong's Talk at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art*, a Translation of the 1943 Text with Cotemporary, translated and edited by Bonnie McDougall. Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, 1980.

² Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes* (New York, 1965),15.

³ In the context of Chinese revolution and socialist construction, the political propaganda poster is not an independent painting style, but the generic name for various genres of painting that have actual historical functions. It takes numerous forms, such as woodcut, comic, block print, oil painting, Chinese painting, etc. In this study, all painting forms with the function of political communication are regarded as political propaganda posters, not merely those works clearly marked as "propaganda posters".

media in which contemporary propaganda posters are displayed. In this sense, there has been no decline in the creation and display of propagation posters.

As part of the educational goals of propaganda, the posters reflect the CCP and Chinese government's theorization of women's liberation movements in the People's Republic of China (hereinafter called the "PRC"). In a narrow sense, Chinese women's liberation refers to the women's liberation movements (including their theoretical construction) under the leadership of the CCP. In a broad sense – that is, in all attempts and programs aimed at removing the shackles that constrain Chinese women from multiple aspects such as ideology, body, and culture, so as to realize their rights and interests – can be traced back even to feudal society. Under the promotion of male elites, the Ming and Qing Dynasties saw early practices of women's liberation in attempts to abolish arranged marriages, foot binding and other questionable feudal traditions, as well as the establishment of women's studies in contemporary academic discipline. In this sense, both the liberal gender equality introduced based on the western Christian concept of equality, and the Marxist gender equality influenced by Chinese political programs were ideas that already existed in Chinese society in the 20th century. Although the latter of these two interpretative frameworks belongs to mainstream discourse, it does not mean that the former has no followers in Chinese society. Faced with the strong presence of the latter, the former has long existed, both explicitly and implicitly, in the thoughts and actions that surround the discourse of gender equality.

The interaction between these two interpretation frameworks is also reflected in propaganda posters. Specifically, as formulated in the official discourses of the CCP and central government, the theoretical construction, policy planning, and action implementation of gender equality and women's liberation require the creators of propaganda posters to exert their imaginations and reflect the official line through the depiction of specific characters, scenes, and events. The individual narrative dominated by the government once promoted the grand cultural scene, in which literary and artistic creations flourished. However, room for development in this cultural scene was strangled during the cultural revolution. This study aims to explore first how the visual image of women's liberation was successfully realized under the benign interaction of individual narratives and national discourse in the early days of the PRC; second, this study will show how individual narrative were suppressed by the national discourse, which resulted in the avoidance of the interpretation of female identity imagination; and third, how individual narratives and national discourse reached a complex state of intertwinement in the post-socialist period.

From the perspective of Western feminist criticism, the state-led policies and political practices of the early days of the PRC relating to women's liberation still essentially represented the constructions of the patriarchy, as women's groups and female consciousness were encouraged from on high. However, when discussing feminist issues in relation to China, it is essential to integrate the problems of Chinese

consciousness, western theory, and the Chinese reality. Therefore, by bring the concept of “state feminism”⁴, this section attempts to examine the fact that the propaganda (including various cultural activities and policy arrangements) was an important carrier of women’s liberation in the early days of the PRC. Its objective effects proved that state feminism might be the most effective discourse strategy in China at that time.

Since the founding of the PRC in 1949, the Chinese government has given top priority to political communication. As a literary and artistic forms, the propaganda poster has successfully completed its political tasks, mobilizing the public with vivid visual language and disseminating important political ideas with clear themes. In the early days of the PRC, although the feminist movements were initially limited to women’s struggle for the political rights, they recognized further aspects of gender liberation that attracted worldwide attention. These aspects laid a broad ideological foundation for the further liberation of female consciousness, and for the third wave of western feminism’s criticism of the state feminism. However, success in political practice does not necessarily entail the full realization of theory. In contemporary China, we need to inaugurate a new round of discourse analysis on state feminism. What kind of

⁴ “State feminism” is not a concept invented by this author. According to statistics provided by Jstor, 2 research reports, 19,553 book entries, and 76,678 article entries involve the concept of “state feminism”. Although there is a wealth of research on “state feminism”, scholars generally study it in accordance with their own research needs, and the basic characteristics of “state”. As such, they have not reached a consensus on the definition of the concept of “state feminism”. To a certain extent, “state feminism” is an open and flexible concept, which is conducive to academic expression in specific contexts.

background we are facing? What changes do we want to make? And what we can do to achieve these goals?

2.2 Research on the Propaganda Posters

There are three fundamental academic lines of enquiry suggested by these propaganda posters, characterized as they are by strong ideology and strict discipline:

1) What are these posters about? In other words, what messages are conveyed by these posters (including all the elements in the works, such as colors, lines, symbolic signs, combinations of characters, scenes, etc.)?

2) What are the backgrounds of these posters? What are the purposes of creating these posters? If they convey some information, why are they created in the form of poster? Is there any connection between different posters and messages?

3) Who are the authors of these posters? What are their philosophies of creation? Does propaganda poster, a special form of aesthetic, occur by accident, rise and disappear suddenly? How do we analyze it from the perspective of historical materialism?

Through these lines of enquiry, it can be seen that the What, Why, and How are the main questions in evaluating any entity or event in history.

Response to these questions will begin to illuminate the role of the propaganda poster. Firstly, it must be noted that these propaganda posters do not depict real life. Rather, they feature the re-creation of historical scenes and the delineation of a future

ideal, under the guidance of political ideology. Specifically, the themes of the posters concerning the old days decry the backwardness of the past, and concomitantly highlight the importance and necessity of the current struggle. Meanwhile, the themes of the posters regarding the present directly echo the political themes of the time and promote the political mobilization. Finally, posters about the future depict a better life in the future, and thus disseminate the revolutionary ideal. These messages are supplemented with key textual information, propagating the ideas, assumptions, and plans concerned for the audience in an intuitive and vivid way.

Secondly, the backgrounds of these propaganda posters are bound up with political development (including the military revolution, the social revolution, and the cultural revolution) of the time. It is therefore political practice that drove the development of this art form. Specifically, during the era of rapid changes in the political world, the propaganda posters evolved from earlier woodcarvings, and achieved nationwide success by integrating themselves with various political slogans/themes of the time. When economic development became the theme of the country, the propaganda posters, as political tools, immediately disappeared under political intervention.

Thirdly, the authors of these political posters are a group of painters. Strictly speaking, they could not put their names in their works, since at the time, this would symbolize bourgeois corruption and individualistic ideology. Nor could they freely

express their individual design ideas. If aesthetic activity is a specific manifestation/practice of philosophy, irrelevant to ontology or epistemology, and only focuses on the pursuit of truth, goodness, and beauty, then China's propaganda poster is not so much an aesthetic activity as a typically pragmatic political communication means.

Based on the above three preliminary conclusions, we may further explore the relationship between propaganda posters and the feminist movements in China, as well as the interaction and interweaving of individual narrative and national discourse. If the political/revolutionary theme is an obvious clue that runs through the lifecycle of the propaganda poster, then gender liberation is a hidden clue that cannot be ignored.

On the one hand, since the May Fourth Movement, the concept and discourse around gender awakening began to emerge in China. After the founding of the PRC in 1949, the CCP proposed the concept that "women hold up half the sky" and took a series of measures that implemented this concept, both intentionally and unintentionally. In the end, these "Chinese feminist movements" made remarkable achievements and attracted worldwide attention. On the other hand, posters are required to express their relevant topics by depicting specific people and their life scenes; inevitably, this involves specific imaginative constructions about men and women. So, are these images about women different from those in the past (the period of the 1911 Revolution and the traditional feudal society)? Have their suggested behavioral norms changed? How is the

CCP's proposal of "gender equality" reflected in the posters? What is the historical significance of the interaction between national discourse and feminine consciousness for the globalization and postmodernism of China? "State feminism" is endowed with legitimacy by national discourse, leading to the cultivation of state-led women's liberation movements, as is visualized by the propaganda poster. The answers to the above questions are reflected in those static posters and the dynamic thoughts they suggest. We need to continue the cause of women's liberation that has not been completed through the propaganda posters.

2.3 The Role of Propaganda Poster in Promoting Women's Liberation

As the propaganda form of various political movements, the propaganda poster reflects the political movement. The creators of propaganda posters are not specific departments or institutions under the guidance of the CCP or the central government; they are professional artists, amateurs, students of the academy of fine arts, even peasants and workers. However, the production, distribution and exhibition of propaganda posters lie under the control of the state authority. In this sense, the creators of the propaganda posters act as spokespersons of an abstract state, outlining the national image that the state needs.

In the early days of the PRC, the national discourse merged mainstream ideology with folk discourse. The propaganda posters of the PRC completed their political mobilization through the creation and presentation of visual images endowing females

with the new identities of the socialist revolutionaries and builders, and the owners of the PRC. The image-building of females was in line with mainstream ideological discourse. The official purpose was to extend spiritual consensus through visual symbols, thereby elevating the individual's performance and overall value, and achieving the high unity of national ideology.

Guided by the CCP and central government, the literary and art workers imagined and shaped the female images of the PRC. Through these images, the females were collectively incorporated into the national narrative, helping women complete the transformation from "female citizens" to the "masters of the PRC". In this way, they would serve the cause of the CCP and central government. During the above processes, there emerged the mode of action that featured with women's liberation and gender equality, namely "state feminism", which has the following three characteristics:

- 1) Adherence to the leadership of the CCP: On the whole, one of the characteristics of Chinese women's liberation was the realization of the women's overall rights through the leadership of the CCP and the top-down operation. The realization of women's overall rights marked the realization of the rights of an oppressed nation and an exploited class.

- 2) Guidance from the Marxist view of women: The CCP is guided by Marxist theory, which is rich in ideas about women's liberation. Therefore, the women's liberation movement after the founding of the PRC is considered to be

“Marxism/socialist feminism” with Chinese characteristics. However, there are differences between the “Marxist view of women”, “Marxist feminism”, “socialist feminism”, and “the theory of socialist women’s liberation with Chinese characteristics under the guidance of Marxism”.

3) Striving for the ultimate liberation of women and the protection of women’s rights and interests: China’s political culture stresses “the same structure of the clan and country” and the need to “show concern for the country and the people before anything else”. Only by realizing the independence and liberation of the country can individuals achieve their own independence and liberation. Therefore, against the background of the Chinese revolution, it was legitimate for male elites to incorporate women’s groups into the revolutionary narrative. As such, women’s groups voluntarily joined the revolution to achieve national independence.

In the early days of the PRC, the majority of women in rural areas were illiterate and had no experience in the grand political narrative such as national independence and development. Through the new regime’s work concerning females and the CCP-led women’s liberation movements – that is, through tangible benefits such as land, freedom of marriage, social labor, and higher social status – they recognized and understood that movements and policies brought benefits to women’s groups. The dual development of individual cognition and quality of life brought about by political events brought about

the awakening of independent consciousness in women, helping women to pursue the realization of their rights after they realized the initiative of the subject.

In 1950, due to drastic changes in society, the PRC faced a number of major obstacles. All events in the political, economic, cultural, military, and social fields were closely related to the women's groups. In that year, land reform, the campaign to eliminate illiteracy, the ban on prostitution and the promulgation of Marriage Law all promoted women's participation in social and political events and facilitated their social liberation.

In this sense, with propaganda posters as one of its main media, state feminism was a specific manifestation of a movement, as well as a state-led, top-down group-movement model, which laid the foundations for the idea, ideology and political identity for the development of the women's liberation movements in China.

2.3.1 Concept

From the perspective of women's studies, propaganda posters constitute a self-consistent text, presenting a concept of gender that is far-reaching and deeply rooted in people's minds through the nationwide spread of propaganda posters. It affects the generation born in the early days of the PRC, and the new generation grown up in an environment where "gender equality" is taken as the basic gender consciousness.

The traditional Chinese culture requires females to be loyal to their father, husband, and son, while males must be loyal to the state. That is to say, in Chinese

feudal culture, the loyalty to the state as morality is the “exclusive right of males”; while female loyalty to family members is their most basic morality. In the moral and ethical system of the PRC, in contrast, the female group is included in the value system of “loyalty”, emphasizing that women should be loyal to the revolution and the state as citizens. The result is that when they make value-judgments about themselves, females can temporarily get rid of the original male standards – that is, female role ethics, such as being a good wife and good mother, as required by males under the patriarchal system – and participate in the direct individual-state interaction. It is of great significance to the ideological emancipation of the women in the PRC to rid themselves of the feudal family, to participate in national public life, and to gain appreciation and recognition through their individual public practices.

In addition, propaganda posters extolled women in various industries who had made contributions to the revolution and social construction, portrayed the female image as an exemplar and affirmed the positive role of females in family, society and the country. This broke from the mainstream gender arrangement that had the man going out to work while the woman looks after the family members. Although men were not required to take on more housework, the recognition and advocacy of women as public people from the perspective of ideology made it legitimate for females in the new era to struggle for greater rights and to challenge the traditional gender culture.



(a)

(b)

Figure 1: (a) *Female skydiver* 女跳伞兵, Shanghai Picture Press 上海图片出版社, 1957; (b) *Women Models in New China* 新中国的妇女模范, Hua Mei Press 华美出版社, 1953

Specifically, the activities of liberated Chinese women were no longer confined to the traditional “private sphere” of the family. With the change of the national political themes, they began to participate in the activities within the “public domain”, such as production, social work, political movement, political participation, cultural construction, nation building, revolutionary wars (see Figure 1 (a)). In addition, it was found that the image of professional women recognized by the state was featured with liberated characteristics when the women in PRC partook in work previously unavailable to them (see Figure 1 (b)).

Influenced by various political media including propaganda posters, generations growing up in the PRC have had a high awareness of gender equality and gender liberation and internalize the new gender cognition in the process of growth. One

woman expressed it thus: “I was born after the 1960s and lived in Beijing since I was a child. During my growth, no one told me that girls were different from boys. The propaganda posters always depicted the Iron Girls with an impressive appearance and the female militias of valiant and heroic bearing. The education I received was that ‘the times have changed, and men and women are the same.’”⁵ In this sense, such self-cognition is more liberating than some contemporary people who hold the traditional view that man is superior to woman.

2.3.2 Ideology

The introduction of official ideology is conducive to defining, constructing and legalizing the new social identity, and to forming new thinking styles and social norms. In the course of the women’s liberation movements led by the CCP, a series of slogans concerning “gender equality” were proposed, such as “women should gain a higher social status”, “be master in house”, “go out for work”, “women’s liberation”, “women hold up half the sky”, etc. These specific slogans can be seen as different inquiries and calls on women by the mainstream ideology in different periods. These political calls, updated from time to time, have the same core goal, i.e. to eliminate gender differences.

From the initial improvement in social status to getting out of the house, seeking liberation, and fighting, its ultimate goal was to achieve gender equality. In particular,

⁵ Huang Wanling. *The Reactions of Women — The Voices of a Group of Chinese Women Who Participated in the Preparatory Meeting for 1995 International Congress of Women*. Ford Foundation. 1995, 289.

the term “Iron Girl” is arguably the most extreme “anti-feminine trait” in the depiction of female images in the national discourse of the 20th century. From focusing only on women’s reproductive and aesthetic functions to ignoring the differences in physiology and gender characteristics, the term “Iron Girl” affirmed the important historical role of women as the historical creators for the PRC. However, it is also an indisputable fact that it harmed the physical health of women.

2.3.3 Political Identity

While upholding and implementing specific political themes, all Chinese literary and artistic works, especially propaganda posters, recognize the dominant position of the CCP and central government, thereby raising the political identity of the audiences to the state and the CCP. It is the unique charm of artistic mobilization to make the audiences complete the identity construction in the process of watching. Two cases may be taken as examples.



Figure 2: *Defend Peace* 保卫和平, Shanghai Picture Press 上海图片出版社, 1955.

In the work of *Defending Peace* (see Figure 2), the main character is a rural woman who is writing her signature with a child in her arm. In terms of the elements of the image, this rural woman perfectly reflects the requirements of the national discourse for the construction of the female image. The white and clean clothing shows her orderly lifestyle; the embrace of a child manifests her commitment to family affairs; the writing of her signature reflects the Chinese women's participation in the social and political movement and implies that this woman has received some education under the leadership of the new regime. The active participation and enthusiastic support embodied in other characters in the poster reflect the formation of women's identity as political subject. Behind this woman, a man is calling other people to write their signatures. Through this element, the propaganda poster becomes a medium to intervene in real life – his call extends beyond the image to the audiences who see this poster.



Figure 3: *Signature for Peace* 和平签名, Li Dou 李斗, dateless.

Similarly, in Li Dou's "Signature for Peace" (see Figure 3), although there are numerous characters in the poster, the main character is a woman who is writing her signature with a child in her arm. Similarly, there is a man calling other people to write their signatures on the poster.

On the one hand, women in these posters participate in political activities as political subjects. However, on the other, the images of these females will make the audiences associate with the women in real life, and then agree with the political information conveyed by the posters – that it is only by participating in literacy campaigns and productive labor that women can improve their social status and become the masters of the PRC.

2.4 State Feminism — The Obstruction by State Feminism of the Women's Liberation Movement (from Section 2.3)

The women's liberation movement led by the CCP was a national movement aimed at endowing women with rights, endeavoring to protect women's right to equality through policies formulated by male-dominated political forces. Although the movement achieved some results under political means and administrative intervention, it was not able to circumvent the inherent flaws of the national discourse.

First of all, the work concerning women or women's liberation as a national movement is a highly politicized mode of mobilization. In 1922, the Second National Congress of the CCP adopted the "Resolution on the Women's Movement", the first program on the women's movement in the name of a political party in the history of

China. Since then, the women’s movement has become a formal part of the political party’s governance. Over the years, editorials on women also reflected the instructions and leadership of the CCP and central government in work concerning women (Table 1). The scholar Jin Yihong deemed that the theme of these editorials is “how to mobilize women to participate in the current political movement. Women’s liberation is equated with the women’s movement, and the goal of all women’s movements is to mobilize women”⁶.

Table 1: “March Eight” Editorials of People’s Daily over the Years from 1950s to 1980s.

Year	Title
1955	Women Across the Country Mobilized to Participate in the Great Struggle to Build a Socialist Motherland, Liberate Taiwan, and Defend Peace
1956	Give Full Play to Women’s Great Role in Socialist Construction
1957	Give Fuller Play to the Socialist Enthusiasm of Women
1958	Everywhere is a Female Champion
1959	Women, Make Great Contributions and Make Greater Contributions
1960	New Stage of Women’s Liberation Movement in China
1961	Women, Contribute More to This Year’s Agricultural Harvest
1962	Make Women’s Work More Practical, Deeper and More Detailed
1963	Women, Fighting for a New Victory
1964	1982: Giving Play to Women’s Role in Building Two Civilizations
1965	Women, Carry Forward the Spirit of Revolution for New Victory
1966	Establishing Revolutionary Ambitions and Hard-Working Skills- “March 8th” International Women’s Labor Day
1967-1973	Highlighting Politics and Giving Full Play to the Role of Women
	Vacancy

⁶ Jin Yihong. *Rethinking the “Iron Girls”: Gender and Labor in China during the Cultural Revolution*. Sociological Studies. 2006, (1) 173.

1974	Women are Mobilized
1975-1979	Vacancy
1980	Women's Glory Fighting Festival Worldwide (Theme: Mobilizing Women for the Four Modernizations)
1981	The Whole Society Must Attach Importance to and Care for Women and Children

Secondly, propaganda posters fulfilled the role of political communication by illustrating the will of the state. From the perspectives of creative style and expression techniques, female images in propaganda posters are different in different periods. To some extent, they have had a positive impact on the development and advancement of society – for example, by depicting images of exceptional women, they intuitively show the state power's recognition of females/individuals based on their historical contributions. If we take the propaganda poster as one of the means and manifestations of the CCP and the central government to promote women's liberation, and regard the female images in propaganda posters as a measure of liberation, it is not difficult to find that, although the state feminism has largely changed the traditional image of Chinese women and shaped the image of women in the PRC, it continually constrains female subjects and female discourses in various hidden forms.

In propaganda posters themselves, or in discussions of propaganda posters as influenced by the Soviet Union, gender issues were actually ignored by mainstream revolutionaries and national narratives. When the creators and scholars of revolutionary propaganda posters summarize the rules of creation and reflect on their experience, they

discuss the gender perspective, intentionally or not, but they refrain from conducting any in-depth study of it. That is to say, they have noticed the narrative power and the encouragement of the propaganda posters with typical female images, but they have not considered in any depth to what extent this deliberate portrays of female images benefitted women, and to what extent it may cause new constraints and even oppression on women.

Specifically, on the one hand, the painters chose female images to express specific themes (strong emotions, such as revenge, salvation, complaints, joy, hope), but they did not explore why women had this narrative value or function. On the other hand, a specific female image was considered a typical representative of a specific group of women in reality, but there was no further reflection on why this kind of trait made it typical. For instance, why should the typical female be industrious and thrifty in managing a household? Is it not possible to change the original stereotype?

The Chinese propaganda poster is a direct reflection and practice of the application of the gendered image in the national narrative. The regulation of national feminism featured, with an obvious women's liberation consciousness, in the image and role norms of women in the PRC. As mentioned earlier, although the state feminism has largely improved the traditional image of Chinese women and shaped the image of women in the PRC, it has also continually constrained female subjects and female discourses in various hidden forms.

2.4.1 State Centralism

State centralism is a term coined in the criticism of nationalism and refers to the political practice in which the state has considerable control over economic or/and social policies. The term emphasizes that the state plays a dominant role in deciding what is done to benefit of country, instead of for the sake of certain individuals or groups. In the broadest sense, state centralism overlaps with the important manifestation – namely, the nation-statism – of revolutionary centralism and the nationalism. For example, Dai Jinhua argued that “from the perspective of classical feminism, statism is the same as nationalism and typical state nationalism. ‘It is the concentrated expression of the patriarchal structure and the source of social repression and violence.’”⁷

The liberation of Chinese women as collective socialization was achieved through the socialist revolution. However, in the new era, they were called the “female comrades of the PRC”, a title that was closely related to politics and had nothing to do with self-identification. Chinese women were closely connected with the state, nationality, and society; their social consciousness was much higher than individual consciousness; their female (gender) consciousness was very fragile, and their desire for women’s liberation was much stronger than that for personal development.

⁷ Dai Jinhua. *Introduction 2: Is There Any Alternative Possibility to Break through the Black-White Clear-Cut View on Gender?* Selected by Chen Shunxin and Dai Jinhua. *Women, Nation and Feminism*. Central Compilation & Translation Press. 2004, 27. (This quote is translated by me)

The state centralism embodied in propaganda posters not only reflects the female image that serves the CCP and central government as the political subject, but also shows the ubiquitous influence of the CCP and central government. First and foremost are the revolution and the state as the primary keywords of social-political life. On the one hand, the interests of the females are not the primary consideration, even in the formulation of women-related policies. Further, the appeal of the state to females out of political factors can even be presented directly to the public in a straightforward narrative:

“In the event that the total industrial output value has doubled, the number of industrial workers will double or even more... We need much more industrial workers. If we do not tap the labor potential of urban women, we will inevitably recruit more women from rural areas. As agriculture needs lots of labor force and the excessive increase of urban population may aggravate the burden on the suppliers of life services, the correct strategy is to recruit less rural women and more urban women.”⁸

China's top-down leadership of work concerning women and women's liberation movements provided legal guarantees for the efficiency and achievements in this operation mode. Meanwhile, in turn, actual progress and development demonstrated the correctness and legality of the model. On the other hand, the female image is introduced into the propaganda works in part as a political symbol to show women's liberation. More importantly, the female image is conducive to presenting the

⁸ Ma Wenrui. *Further Liberation of Women's Labor*. Labor. 1958, 15. (This quote is translated by me)

superiority of the policies under the leadership of the new regime and a series of successful outcomes.



Figure 4: *The Red Sun Shining Warmly over Thousands of Generations* 红太阳光辉暖万代, Kang Zuotian 亢佐田, dateless.

Taking Figure 4 as an example, the poster shows an old lady telling students of past misery and present happiness. The elements in the poster fully highlight the theme it wants to express: the basket and shabby gourd ladle symbolize the backward and miserable past, while the inscription “Chairman Mao is the savior of the people” on the blackboard, the slogan “Long live Chairman Mao” in the classroom and the statue of Chairman Mao represent the new China, the new atmosphere and the new life. The gorgeous spring scenery outside the window symbolizes a happy life. The female image always seems to be most persuasive in works concerning complaints and praise.



Figure 5: *Invincible Mao Zedong Thought Illuminates the Stage of Revolutionary Art* 战无不胜的毛泽东思想照亮了革命艺术舞台, Wang Zhaoda 王肇达, 1968.

Secondly, the elimination of gendered characteristics in females is a unique and regular expression of the artistic creation of the PRC. Some scholars hold that the female image shows the “stylized, symbolic, and formulaic revolutionary image with a happy smile” in the artistic works during the cultural revolution”⁹. For example, as the representative of the most powerful female at that time, Jiang Qing was the most influential political power among Chinese females since the founding of the PRC; however, she was also neutralized by revolutionism in the literary and artistic works. It is difficult to distinguish the image of Jiang Qing in the propaganda posters during the Cultural Revolution from the images of other “revolutionary fighters”, because they all wear military uniforms and hold their Red Books high with revolutionary optimism.

⁹ Zhang Jingmiao. *An Analysis of the Female Images in the Artistic Works of the Cultural Revolution*. Journal of Guizhou University (Art Edition). 2018, (1) 69-70.

The only difference – the only gendered element reflected in the image – is that Jiang Qing wears glasses (see Figure 5).

The “neutralization”/ “masculinization” of the clothing and even the appearance of female image visually presented the idea that “men and women are the same”. However, women’s unique sexual characteristics (such as the uterus, one of the big differences between female and male in physiology) cannot be erased by external dress. Accordingly, we rarely see the image of “pregnant woman” in propaganda posters. Even in propaganda posters with themes of “healthy propagation and scientific nurture” and “family planning”, the female is presented in the image of children or the happy individual. This blind spot regarding this unique feature of women has been among the main reasons for criticism of the women’s liberation movements in the PRC. Under the background of the new-born country and the long-standing cognitive context of collective consciousness, reflection on or pursuit of gender independence was not seen as an urgent historical mission for a new regime; however, from the perspective of historical analysis, the unrealized of this mission has received some well-deserved criticism.

2.4.2 Patriarchal/male Centralism



Figure 6: *Learn How to Ride a Bicycle* 学骑自行车, Jiang Feng 江风, 1957.

In the revolutionary propaganda posters, the female subjects acting as role models or women in the new era are all led by great males; females participate in political life under the guidance of their fathers, or of the CCP. In this sense, the woman of the PRC is actually a “pseudo-subject” concept, and her liberated consciousness regarding the revolution and socialist construction is driven by external regulation, rather than the internal awakening. Thus, in the works represented by Figure 6, women often need the help of men, including assistance in life skills, production skills, revolutionary consciousness, and enlightenment. Although the work presents a female image and survival experience that are completely different from those in older times, the implicit premise is the support of men and patriarchal state. For the works indicating that women move toward a new society under the guidance of the patriarchal state, it is necessary to explore the hidden information of the image to figure out the problem. The

“Freedom of Marriage” by Ren Qianqiao (see Figure 7) depicts a scene in which a rural couple receives the marriage certificate after the promulgation of the Marriage Law of the People’s Republic of China. On behalf of the CCP and central government, the marriage registrar gives the marriage certificate to the husband, and the wife smiles shyly. It can be seen from the posters concerning the propaganda of Marriage Law that they put more emphasis on “free marriage” and the great historical initiative of the CCP and central government than on the promotion of “gender equality”. The details on gender equality – what does it mean? How can it be achieved? What is the standard of measurement – in marriage are vague or even frustratingly absent.



Figure 7: *Freedom of Marriage* 婚姻自由, Ren Qianqiao 任迁乔, 1950.

Support the army and give preferential treatment to the families of the army-man and martyrs is another theme that fully reflects the weak position of females in the power discourse system. In the scene of people expressing warm greetings to the People’s Volunteer Army (see Figure 8), the soldiers representing the state are

surrounded by women and children. Women are directly related to the material rewards and show their greetings and gratitude as a group to be saved. However, it is another story in the scene of offering condolences to honorable military families. In Figure 9, there are many people, most of them women and children. In the center of the picture, a male representative of the CCP offers condolences, in both a spiritual and material sense, to the male representative of the honorable military families.



Figure 8: Conduct the Spring Festival's Activity of "Support the Army and Give Preferential Treatment to the Families of the Army-man and Martyrs" 开展春节“拥军优属”运动.



Figure 9: Support the Honored Families of the Soldiers 慰问光荣军属.

By comparing the spatial configurations of power in Figure 8 and Figure 9, it can be observed that the former shows the gratitude and appreciation of vulnerable groups, represented by women, to the powerful groups that represent the state will. The female image is directly related to the material rewards. Additionally, it reflects the CCP and central government's rhetoric of the salvation of the Chinese people. This latter is the recognition and propaganda of the CCP for the families of the martyrs. In this process, the national discourse calls and shapes the people; through the title of honorable military family, the state devolves part of its discourse authority to a specific individual, who will influence and motivate other individuals to participate in the recognition of the country and the dedication to it under the authority of the state. Although women are often considered to be the persons mainly responsible for the private sector of the family, once they participate in the construction of the power discourse, male control the family sphere, that is, the male as the family representative engages in a dialogue with the state power and participates in the operational mechanism of the family and state. In this sense, the subordinate status of women in the family is evident.

In addition, it can be seen from the revolutionary propaganda posters that the scenes involving female images are mostly private spaces in the traditional sense. It is in line with the sexual division of labor in traditional culture, i.e. "males go out for work, while females stay at home to care for the family members". For instance, there are a variety of forms of expression for the theme of "struggling for the realization of the

overall task in the new era". One is that woman is presented in the image of the peasant; another is the expression of female image with an emphasis on "healthy propagation and scientific nurture" and "family planning" (although propagation and nurture are the common tasks of males and females). From the perspective of contemporary females' struggle for women's reproductive autonomy, family planning represents the state discourse's severe deprivation of women's reproductive rights and physical power. However, the female image is full of optimism and hopes in the propaganda posters concerning the introduction of the family planning policy and relevant means (taking medicines) of family planning. In the view of a radical feminism that advocates femininity and calls for the establishment of female utopia, this is a great and bitter irony.

It is disheartening that, even in the traditional private space, due to the conflict between the revolution-oriented discourse and the female individual narrative, it is impossible to express the specific and individual feelings of women. Superficially, women may have been liberated. However, in actual fact, they still have not rid themselves of the passive and obedient role required of them by traditional culture. Family, society, and country are all constructed and maintained based on patriarchal will. In the process of transforming from housewives to social participants, women have faced a status-change from the original "obeyers" to their families, to the present "obeyers" to the entire society. It is gratifying, at least, that state feminism has laid the

foundation for the liberation of Chinese women and has collapsed the patriarchal ideology to some extent. On this basis, the females in the new society are much more likely to obtain free space than those in traditional society.

Acting as creative elements, as this study demonstrates, both female and male images are symbols with instrumental value. The problem is that the imagery and political significance of the male image are much higher than those of the female image. However, from the perspective of artistic creation, compared with the male image, the female image is arguably more diverse in beauty and stronger in expression, thus it has higher aesthetic value. In the creation of propaganda posters, the aesthetic value plays a positive role in balancing political standards and artistic standards. It also partially explains the primary intention of conveying strong emotional themes such as complaint, harvest, and celebration assigned to female images.

According to this logic, the female image and body, with their high aesthetic value, reflect the subordinate status of female as the objectified Other, to be viewed, even stared at. As the audiences of propaganda posters, the women that the state aims to motivate through propaganda posters do not gain the principal status. They examine and compare themselves with the female images in the posters and make demands of themselves that they become the new women, who meets the requirements of the state, according to these ideal female images created by the posters. In this sense, the female as an audience internalizes the gaze of the state and actively participates in the gaze and

discipline of the other. In short, in this “political marketing” process, the female image serves as a tool, used to attract “customers”, namely the masses. Female audiences imitate the female image, reproduced out of political needs of the national discourse, without the knowledge that this recurring female image is more or less distorted and suppressed.

In 1957, Zhaohua Fine Arts Publishing House published the book “China’s Propaganda Posters”, which collected twenty-one posters. Nine of them involved female images. As can be seen from the above table, the number of posters incorporating female images are greatly outnumbered by those involving male images. The slogan of “gender equality” makes the representation of female images mere “political correctness”. Only in its introduction of female images into posters can the state spread the theme that the people of the whole country participate in revolution/social construction. However, only a few propaganda posters involve female images. On the one hand, female images are often associated with themes of strong emotions, such as “complaint”, “liberation”, “redemption”, “pleasure”, “harvest”, “nature”, etc., which echo seemingly eternal and traditional perceptual narratives of women. Whether it is to amplify through women the individual hatred that would stimulate the fighting will of the masses to participate in the wars and revolutions, or to turn joy into the emotional power to infect the vast number of people to recognize the new regime, the narrative logic is to associate the women with various emotions, while the male image symbolizes rationality, and is

“more suitable” for showing the grand narratives of salvation, victory, sacrifice, and so on.

3. From Hobby (Aihao) to Activity (Huodong): Collecting Stamps in Socialist China?

Language was substituted for power, for it was the sole guarantee that power would belong only to the people, that is, to nobody.²⁷

—Francois Furet

In the hands of the Communists, language took on the Marxist function of an instrument for class struggle, fostering social change and revolutionary reform.²⁸

—Hung, Chang-tai

3.1 Introduction

In a transitional period, language turns out to be a symbol of power, politics then becomes a competition for words. Arif Dirlik argued that “Learning a new language and forgetting the old has been a basic problem in Chinese politics, as is evident in the radical shift in the language of socialist ideology”²⁹. New language wields enormous political power. To some extent, it justifies the legitimacy of political power and even signals a new era. For Chinese communists, creating and adopting a new language not only aims to break with the past, but also indicates new power relation and class struggle. Determined to examine the complicated relationship of language and politics, I attempt to research different discourses related to collecting stamps, namely, the philately, in 1950s People’s Republic of China (PRC).

²⁷ Furet Francois. *Interpreting the French Revolution*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l’Homme. 1981, 48.

²⁸ Hung Chang-tai. *Going to the People: Chinese Intellectuals and Folk Literature*. Cambridge Mass: Council on East Asian Studies. 1918-1937, (121).

²⁹ Dirlik Arif. *Marxism in the Chinese Revolution*. Lanham Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. 2005, 152.

From 1955 to 1966, the officially sanctioned journal—*Jiyou* (Philately) defined how to collect postage stamp correctly. That said, according to the discourse of *Jiyou*, Chinese collectors need to not only avoid investigating stamps out of bourgeois interest, but also recognize the “class character (jijie xing)” and “revolutionary meaning (geming yiyi)” of collecting postage stamp. The discourse of *Jiyou* highlights the class character and the revolutionary meaning of the act of collecting postage stamps. It strives to modify the nature of collecting stamps from a hobby to an (or a political) activity. Here naming plays an important role in endowing the old habit of collecting stamps with a new, desirable meaning that newly built socialist China demands. Drawing from Arif Dirlik’s idea, my section will scrutinize how language (a new socialist language of the PRC) shaped the power relations between the official voice of the journal *Jiyou* and the different voices of its diverse readers.

3.2 From Hobby (Aihao) to Activity (Huodong): The Founding of Jiyou Journal

Using the postage stamp, which celebrated the one-year foundation of People’s Republic of China, as cover image, the first volume of *Jiyou* (Philately) journal was published in January 1955. The cover image of the first volume reveals the journal’s effort to redefine the purpose of philately and to use a strategic terminology that replaces aihao (Hobby) with huodong (Activity) as a means to legitimize the new socialist state. It is the first official journal on collecting stamps. In its first volume, there was an article wrote by the editor, titled “Building the New Trend of Philately” (*Shuli*

Xin de Jiyou Fengqi)³⁰. Based on the close-reading of this article and visual analysis of the cover image of first volume, this section will analyze how *Jiyou* magazine uses official voice to interpret philately, and how the terminology from hobby (aihao) to activity (huodong) underlines the political power in legitimating the philately in socialist China.

Initially, collecting stamps was a hobby which emerged among the middle and upper class in European countries since the late nineteenth century. With the birth of the first postage stamp, the Penny Black, which was issued by the UK in May 1840, postage stamps start to serve as a receipt for payment for a service. In this economic (and social) role, it needs only to show the value of the payment and the service for which the payment was made and to identify its issuer. However, it is the visual qualities which turn an ordinary stamp into an aesthetically pleasing, collectible object. Later, beginning with the British ladies of upper classes, more and more people are fascinated by collecting postage stamps. Gradually, philately becomes a hobby in capitalist countries. To some extent, using “hobby” to identify philately is not unusual. However, in the first volume of *Jiyou* magazine, the editor declared that the action of collecting stamps needs to be called an “activity” (huodong) instead of a “hobby” (aihao).

To examine how *Jiyou* magazine interpreted philately in official voice I will quote the first paragraph of the article “Building the New Trend of Philately”. In this article,

³⁰ Zhonghua Quanguo Jiyou Lianhe Hui 中华全国集邮联合会, Renmin Youdian Chuban She 人民邮电出版社, Zhongguo Jiyou Chuban She 中国集邮出版社. *Shuli Xin de Jiyou Fengqi* 树立新的集邮风气. *Jiyou* 集邮. 1955, 1.

the editor not only referred to philately as an “activity”, which is different from capitalist country’s naming of “hobby”, but also acclaimed the reason and goal for publishing the *Jiyou* magazine in the People’s Republic of China.

在人民民主国家里，集邮是一种正常的文化教育和娱乐活动。人们集邮，不是为了赚钱居奇，也不是把它当作少数人把玩的古董，更不是为了满足那些畸形的癖好，去搜集印刷上有错误和缺点的邮票为乐，或者只当作单纯的消遣。在我们国家里，一切都在向社会主义前进，一种完全新的健康的集邮风气正在普遍成长。有不少工人、农民、战士、学生青年们和少年先锋队队员们，他们都喜爱祖国的邮票、苏联的和兄弟国家的邮票，他们欣赏这些邮票的图案，来了解祖国和兄弟国家各方面的建设，丰富自己的知识和鉴赏艺术上的成就。人们需要有一种《集邮》刊物，及时介绍祖国的新的邮票，以正确的集邮观点和方法，介绍祖国的各种纪念邮票、特种邮票和兄弟国家的邮票，说明邮票的图案和史实，介绍集邮知识，以便于大家收集、研究和鉴赏邮票。这就是《集邮》月刊的主要任务³¹。

In People’s Republic of China, philately is a normal cultural education and entertainment activity. People collect stamps, not to make money, or to use it as an antique for a few people, not to satisfy those deformed shackles, to collect stamps with errors and shortcomings in printing, or simply as a pastime. In our country, everything is moving towards socialism, and a completely new and healthy philatelic atmosphere is growing. There are many workers, peasants, soldiers, young students and young pioneers who love the stamps of their motherland, the stamps of the Soviet Union and the fraternal socialist countries. They appreciate the patterns of these stamps to understand the construction of the motherland and the fraternal socialist countries; enrich their knowledge and appreciate the artistic achievements. People need to have a publication related to philately, which can timely introduce the new stamps of the motherland, introduce the commemorative stamps, special stamps and stamps of their motherland and fraternal socialist countries with correct philatelic opinions and methods, explain the pattern and historical facts of the stamps, and introduce stamp collecting knowledge; so that everyone can collect, research and appreciate stamps. This is the main task of this *Jiyou* (Philately) magazine³².

³¹ Zhonghua Quanguo Jiyou Lianhe Hui 中华全国集邮联合会, Renmin Youdian Chuban She 人民邮电出版社, Zhongguo Jiyou Chuban She 中国集邮出版社. *Shuli Xin de Jiyou Fengqi* 树立新的集邮风气. *Jiyou* 集邮. 1995, 1.

³² Zhonghua Quanguo Jiyou Lianhe Hui 中华全国集邮联合会, Renmin Youdian Chuban She 人民邮电出版社, Zhongguo Jiyou Chuban She 中国集邮出版社. *Shuli Xin de Jiyou Fengqi* 树立新的集邮风气. *Jiyou* 集邮. 1995, 1. (Translated from Chinese version)

According to the editor, the reason for people to collect postage stamps in the People's Republic of China is radically different from the reason for collecting stamps in capitalist countries. Instead of "mak(ing) money, or to use it as an antique for a few people", or "satisf(ing) those deformed shackles, to collect stamps with errors and shortcomings in printing", *Jiyou* magazine interpreted philately as "a completely new and healthy" activity. The editor argued, "In People's Republic of China, philately is a normal cultural education and entertainment *activity*". Rather than calling the action of philately as a "hobby (aihao)", in this article, the editor used the word "activity (huodong)" to refer to collecting stamps.

Both in English and Chinese, hobby and activity could mean two different things because the former often refers to a (recreational) pastime and the latter tends to mean a purposeful action to be performed by a certain group of people. Therefore, in fact, how the editor used the term "activity" to describe the action of collecting stamps reflects the political power in choosing a certain word. Such a shift in terminology explains that the discourse of the *Jiyou* journal aimed to eliminate the capitalist nature of philately which potentially had monetary value and profit-seeking predilection. The politics of naming intended to embrace philately under socialism and establish its legitimacy in socialist China.

This point can also be illustrated from the article's description of different groups of people who collect postage stamps in China. By introducing the exemplary collectors

who came from the working class, the editor of *Jiyou* intended to establish the proletarian character of philately. The class identity played an essential role in reforming the undesirable nature of philately as a hobby from the past. In other words, by acclaiming the collectors come from the proletarian class, at the first article of *Jiyou* magazine, the editor spoke out in its official voice, which again legitimates the philately in socialist China.

In the same paragraph I quoted above, the editor argued that, “there are many workers, peasants, soldiers, young students and young pioneers”. For the editor, collectors in socialist country are different from collectors in capitalist country. Rather than coming from bourgeois class, postage stamp collectors in socialist China are “workers”, “peasants”, and “soldiers”. In this light, the philatelists displayed a strong streak of what Fitzpatrick calls “pseudo-proletarianism”³³, that is, philatelists attempted to consolidate class solidarity with workers in order to secure their right political position. As Fitzp comments, “In the rhetoric of cultural revolution, working-class opinion the touchstone of good and evil, and working-class participation was essential to the success of any undertaking”³⁴. In this perspective, the attention to the workers can develop as a means of protection: By establishing contacts with workers, *Jiyou* magazine

³³ Sheila Fitzpatrick. *Cultural Revolution as Class War*. Cultural Revolution in Russia. 1928-1931. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 1978, 66.

³⁴ Ibid.

could legitimize the philately's position in society and thereby gain some security in socialist China.

After analyzing how the shift from hobby (aihao) to activity (huodong) refers to the action of philately and how the connection with workers legitimates the philatelist groups, this section will focus on the cover image of the first volume of *Jiyou* magazine. Based on the visual analysis, I determined to explore the reason for choosing this certain image in interpreting the philately.



Figure 10: (a) The cover page of *Jiyou* magazine in January 1955; (b) *Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Kaiguo Yizhounian Jinian* 中华人民共和国开国一周年纪念, designed by Sun Chuanzhe 孙传哲, rubber and sculpture version 胶版及雕刻版. 1950, 1.

The cover image (see Figure 10 (a)) of *Jiyou* magazine adopted the image of a certain stamp (see Figure 10 (b)), which celebrated the one-year foundation of People's Republic of China in 1950. With the red national flag as the main focus in a central position, there is also a red flower around the bottom of the national flag. In addition, a

clear image featured the outline of the Great Wall appeared in the margin of this postage stamp, with the Chinese character in “Celebrated the One-year Foundation of People’s Republic of China” (*Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Kaiguo Yizhounian Jinian*). The red national flag and the Great Wall in the image serve as political symbols that show the importance of the Chinese Communist Party in building the People’s Republic of China. To some extent, the bright color of the flag might indicate the Communist legacy and ideal of the CCP which was often symbolized by its typical red color; the beautiful Great Wall might reveal the power of Chinese people in its long history.

Based on the visual analysis of this image, by choosing this postage stamp as cover page, *Jiyou* magazine not only signals the purpose of this magazine for educating people on philately, but also indicates their loyalty towards Chinese political power. Using this certain postage stamp with a strong political meaning, this cover page successfully set the basic tone of *Jiyou* magazine — as a propaganda of Chinese Communist Party to promote philately as a politically motivated and even patriotic activity.

In this section, based on close-reading of “Building the New Trend of Philately” and visual analysis of cover image in the first volume of *Jiyou* magazine, I analyzed how the use of activity (*huodong*) and the connection with workers legitimates the philately in socialist China, and how the image of certain stamp reveal the official position of *Jiyou* magazine. In the next section, with visual analysis of cover image of *Jiyou* magazine, this

section will continue to examine the terminology related to the philately. Especially, the discussion of “Are all postage stamps worth collecting? (*Yiqie Youpiao Dou You Shouji Baocun de Jiaozhe ma?*)”³⁵ will be the focus.

3.3 The Criteria for Collecting Postage Stamps: The First Discussion in *Jiyou* Magazine

Starting from February 1957, *Jiyou* magazine set up a special section in discussing certain topics related to philately, including different readers’ opinions and the editor’s review. In this section, focusing on the discussion of “Are all postage stamps worth collecting?”³⁶ and cover images in a series of *Jiyou* magazine, I will analyze how the criteria for collecting postage stamps is interpreted by official voice (national discourse from the CCP) and individual voice (the different philatelist’ discourses), and how these two voices are intertwined with each other. In addition, during the process of discussing what kind of postage stamps are “worthy” or not, *Jiyou* magazine not only declared the official voice regards to the philately, but also spoke out different individual voices from readers. The complicated role of *Jiyou* magazine will also be analyzed in detail.

First, this section will explore the different trajectory related to this discussion topic — “Are all postage stamps worth collecting?”. In February 1957, this volume of *Jiyou* magazine included two readers’ different ideas, which later ignited more readers

³⁵ Zhonghua Quanguo Jiyou Lianhe Hui 中华全国集邮联合会, Renmin Youdian Chuban She 人民邮电出版社, Zhongguo Jiyou Chuban She 中国集邮出版社. *Yiqie Youpiao Dou You Shouji Baocun de Jiaozhe ma?* 一切邮票都有收集保存的价值吗? *Ji You* 集邮. 1957, 2.

³⁶ Ibid.

to participate in this discussion. For one of them, Chen Zhongkui, all postage stamps are worthy to be collected. He argued:

Marxism recognizes that objective things exist independently of people's subjective consciousness. I can ask two kinds of politically reactionary stamps: (1) If we don't collect this stamp, then in this world, will there be no stamps in history? (2) If we do not collect this stamp, then in the world, in history, there will be no such thing as this stamp. Obviously, no matter whether you collect or not, this stamp and the things it contains are basically there, and it doesn't exist because you don't collect it. So why can't we collect it?³⁷

马克思主义承认客观事物存在于人们的主观意识之外而独立存在。各种在政治上反动的邮票，我可以提出两个问题：（1）如果我们不收集这张邮票，那么在这个世界上，在历史上就不会、也不曾有过这张邮票吗？（2）如果我们不收集这张邮票，那么在这个世界上，在历史上就不会、也不曾有过这张邮票所载的这件事物吗？非常明显，不管你收集或不收集，这张邮票和它所载的事物，基本上是有过的，并不因为你不收集，它就不存在了。那么，我们为什么不可以收集呢？这是一³⁸。

Zhongkui not only claimed the necessary for collecting all postage stamps based on Marxism belief, "objective things exist independently of people's subjective consciousness", but also further illustrated the political benefits of collecting every postage stamp. For him, no matter where postage stamps come from, whether socialist countries or capitalist countries, to some extent, they can all be used as "political education". For example, he argued:

Speaking of political and ideological education is concerned, it is not necessarily positive. What is worth learning is considered to be educational. Another aspect of education is the "learning a lesson". For example, the bad guys are exposed in a correct way, just to educate the masses not to do the bad things done by these bad guys. On the philately, why not we also do the same way? We collect the stamps of Lenin, so that we can remember all the great Lenin, receive education, and learn from him better. Then, if we collect the stamps of Hitler's image, can

³⁷ Ibid. (Translated from Chinese version)

³⁸ Ibid.

we not receive the negative education, that is, the lesson? Therefore, from an educational point of view, why can't we collect reactionary and bad stamps?³⁹

就政治思想教育来说，不一定要正面的，值得我们学习的东西，才算是教育意义的。教育的另一方面，那就是“教训”。如大张旗鼓地揭发坏人坏事，就是为了教育群众不要去做这些坏人所作的坏事。在集邮上，又为什么不能这样呢？我们收集列宁象的邮票，使我们记起伟大的列宁的一切，收到教育，更好地向他学习。那么，收集希特勒象的邮票，我们何尝不可以收到反面的教育，也就是教训呢？因此，从教育的角度来看，我们为什么不可以收集反动的邮票呢？⁴⁰

By arguing the benefit of “learning a lesson” from collecting reactionary and bad postage stamps, Zhongkui supported to collect every stamp out of political purpose. To some extent, it is possible that Zhongkui was influenced by the several articles in *Jiyou* magazine in a different way, such as “How to Treat Reactionary Postage Stamps” (*Zenyang Duidai Neirong Fandong de Youpiao*)⁴¹ in May 1956, and “What is the Correct way of Collecting Stamps” (*Shenme she Zhengque de Jiyou*)⁴² in June and July 1956. For example, in the article wrote by the editor, “How to Treat Reactionary Postage Stamps”, he argued:

The contents of the stamps issued by countries all over the world and their ideological and artistic nature have their own different styles and characteristics. Apart from the reactionary stamps, they are worthy of collection and observation.... Before the liberation of China, the Kuomintang reactionaries also issued some reactionary stamps against the people and against democracy. The

³⁹ Ibid. (Translated from Chinese version)

⁴⁰ Zhonghua Quanguo Jiyou Lianhe Hui 中华全国集邮联合会, Renmin Youdian Chuban She 人民邮电出版社, Zhongguo Jiyou Chuban She 中国集邮出版社. *Zenyang Duidai Neirong Fandong de Youpiao*? 怎样对待反动邮票? *Ji You* 集邮. 1956, 5.

⁴¹ Zhonghua Quanguo Jiyou Lianhe Hui 中华全国集邮联合会, Renmin Youdian Chuban She 人民邮电出版社, Zhongguo Jiyou Chuban She 中国集邮出版社. *Shenme she Zhengque de Jiyou*? 什么是正确的集邮? *Ji You* 集邮. 1956, 6-7.

⁴² Zhonghua Quanguo Jiyou Lianhe Hui 中华全国集邮联合会, Renmin Youdian Chuban She 人民邮电出版社, Zhongguo Jiyou Chuban She 中国集邮出版社. *Yiqie Youpiao Dou You Shouji Baocun de Jiaozhe ma*? 一切邮票都有收集保存的价值吗? *Ji You* 集邮. 1957, 2.

adverse effects of these stamps on the people will of course cause people's resentment and rejection by progressive stamp collectors⁴³.

世界各国所发行的邮票的内容及其思想性艺术性，都有各自不同的风格和特色，除了内容反动的邮票外，都是值得收藏和观摩的...我国在解放前，国民党反动派也发行过一些反对人民和反对民主的内容反动的邮票。这些邮票给人民不良的影响，当然会引起人们的反感和被进步的集邮者所唾弃⁴⁴。

Different from the official voice in *Jiyou* magazine, Zhongkui was not against collecting reactionary stamps. For him, these bad stamps also have the same political function as the good stamps. At here, Zhongkui engaged in the discussion of "Are all postage stamps worth collecting?" from an ambiguous position. On the one hand, out of Marxism idea of the objectivity of every activities and things, he believed that every stamps can be collected, thus he more or less ignored the official voice of abandoning stamps from capitalist countries; on the other hand, out of political interest, Zhongkui interpreted the reason for collecting reactionary and bad stamps as "learning a lesson", thus trapped in politicizing the individual activity of collecting stamps. In other words, Zhongkui, himself, was speaking in both individual and official voice.

From analyzing one reader's opinion related to this discussion topic, I illustrated how the individual voice can be intertwined with official voice. To further analyze the criteria for collecting postage stamps from different voices and the complicated role of

⁴³ Zhonghua Quanguo Jiyou Lianhe Hui 中华全国集邮联合会, Renmin Youdian Chuban She 人民邮电出版社, Zhongguo Jiyou Chuban She 中国集邮出版社. *Zenyang Duidai Neirong Fandong de Youpiao?* 怎样对待反动邮票? *Ji You* 集邮. 1956, 5. (Translated from Chinese version)

⁴⁴ Zhonghua Quanguo Jiyou Lianhe Hui 中华全国集邮联合会, Renmin Youdian Chuban She 人民邮电出版社, Zhongguo Jiyou Chuban She 中国集邮出版社. *Shenme she Zhengque de Jiyou?* 什么是正确的集邮? *Ji You* 集邮. 1956, 6-7.

Jiyou magazine, this section will continue to research a series of articles in the discussion of “Are all postage stamps worth collecting?”. From February 1957 to June 1957, different opinions related to this discussion emerged. For example, in April 1957 and May 1957, some people argued that:

(Cui Feng) I agree with the statement that all stamps can be collected. Naturally, we don't have to encourage everyone to collect reactionary stamps, but we shouldn't put a big hat of “impossible ideology” on those who are willing to collect such stamps, but it should be decided by the stamp collector⁴⁵.

（崔丰）我同意一切邮票都可以收集的说法。自然我们不必鼓励大家收集内容反动的邮票，但也不应该给愿意收集这类邮票的人扣上思想意识不“正确”的大帽子，而应该由集邮者自己决定⁴⁶。

(Lan Tian) Stamps are not super-political things. They have a strong class color, so collecting stamps cannot be super-political super-artistic things. However, reactionary stamps can still be collected to some extent. Because it can serve as a criminal evidence of the reactionary ruling class, it can give us a negative education. As long as we can correct the philatelic attitude, study politics, and analyze and criticize it with Marxist views, it will not be poisoned. However, it should be collected in a limited manner, especially children who cannot distinguish between right and wrong. It is not easy to collect reactionary stamps to avoid being poisoned⁴⁷.

（蓝天）邮票不是超政治的东西，它带有浓厚的阶级色彩，因此集邮不可能是超政治的超艺术的事情。但是反动邮票在一定程度上还是可以收集的。因为它可以作为反动统治阶级的一个罪证，可以使我们受到反面的教育，只要我们能够端正集邮的态度，努力学习政治，并用马克思主义观点去分析和批判，是不至于受到毒害的。但是应该有限度有区别地收集，特别是还不能分辨是非的小朋友，不应该轻易去收集反动邮票，以免受到毒害⁴⁸。

(Li Biguang) The purpose of collecting stamps determines the content of stamp collecting. If we are still just a general philatelist, there is absolutely no need to collect reactionary stamps. If we don't have certain critical ability, we will be

⁴⁵ Zhonghua Quanguo Jiyou Lianhe Hui 中华全国集邮联合会, Renmin Youdian Chuban She 人民邮电出版社, Zhongguo Jiyou Chuban She 中国集邮出版社. *Yiqie Youpiao Dou You Shouji Baocun de Jiaozhe ma?* 一切邮票都有收集保存的价值吗? *Ji You* 集邮. 1957, 4-5. (Translated from Chinese version)

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid. (Translated from Chinese version)

⁴⁸ Ibid.

poisoned. If we have the financial ability and time, why not collect and appreciate the stamps with good content? I believe that only stamp collectors with the right analytical skills and research purposes can collect reactionary stamps⁴⁹.

（李必光）集邮的目的决定集邮的内容。如果我们现在还只是一般的集邮爱好者，完全没有必要去收集内容反动的邮票。如果我们还没有具备一定的批判能力势必受其毒害；如果有经济能力和时间，何不收集和欣赏内容好的邮票呢？我认为只有具有正确分析能力和以研究为目的的集邮者，才可以收集内容反动的邮票⁵⁰。

No matter agreeing or disagreeing with Zhongkui, “all stamps can be collected”, these readers more or less confirmed that the criteria for the philately should not be determined only by official discourse. They did not simply oppose to the idea of collecting reactionary stamps, which was claimed by the editor of *Jiyou* magazine. Instead, for them, the question “Are all postage stamps worth collecting?” demands to be considered with the role of collectors. Each collector’s ability to discern “right” from “wrong” stamps determines whether the collector can collect reactionary stamps. Therefore, what is the most important is the collector’s faculties of eliminating the poisonous impact of “reactionary” stamps.

For example, though Cui Feng argued that “all stamps can be collected”⁵¹, yet in the meantime, he also said, “we don’t have to encourage everyone to collect reactionary stamps”, and “it should be decided by the stamp collector” whether “collect reactionary stamps” or not⁵². Similarly, Lan Tian also argued that “reactionary stamps can still be

⁴⁹ Ibid. (Translated from Chinese version)

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

collected to some extent”, but for “children who cannot distinguish between right and wrong”, “It is not easy to collect reactionary stamps to avoid being poisoned”⁵³. Concluded concisely by Li Biguang, “only stamp collectors with the right analytical skills and research purposes can collect reactionary stamps”⁵⁴.

Though under the influence of official voice of *Jiyou* magazine, by shaping the question of “Are all postage stamps worth collecting?” in a certain degree, these readers declared their individual voices in supporting different criteria of the philately for different collectors. At this point, to some extent, *Jiyou* magazine’s complicated role is also revealed. On the one hand, by publishing the editor’s article against collecting reactionary stamps, such as “How to Treat Reactionary Postage Stamps”, *Jiyou* magazine spoke out in official voice, thus influenced the individual collectors; on the other hand, by publishing many readers’ opinions, which are different from the official discourse, such as the discussion related to “Are all postage stamps worth collecting?”, *Jiyou* magazine embraced the conflicting voices of the readers, muddling the official stance of the magazine.

After analyzing how the individual voice and official voice intertwined and the complicated role of *Jiyou* magazine, in the end of this section, I will examine several cover images during the discussion of “Are all postage stamps worth collecting?” in a

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

series of *Jiyou* magazine. Under the first look of these cover pages, there seem to be not direct connection of these images with the discussion topic. However, after the illustration of how the criteria for collecting postage stamps is discussed by individual and official voice, at this point, visual analysis can give us a clue of what stamps actually are considered to be worth collecting by *Jiyou* magazine.



Figure 11: (a) The cover page of *Jiyou* magazine in February 1957; (b) *Putong Youpiao*—*Yiwu Renyuan* 普通邮票—医务人员, designed by Sun Chuanzhe 孙传哲, rubber version 胶版, 1956, 12.



Figure 12: (a) The cover page of *Jiyou* magazine in April 1957; (b) *Quanguo Diyijie Gongren Tiyu Yundong Dahui* 全国第一届工人体育运动大会, designed by Shao Bolin 邵柏林, Liu Shuoren 刘硕仁 and Sun Chuanzhe 孙传哲, rubber version 胶版, 1957, 3.



(a)

(b)

Figure 13: (a) The cover page of *Jiyou* magazine in May 1957; (b) *Hangkong Youpiao – Gonglu Qiche* 航空邮票—公路汽车, designed by Shao Bolin 邵柏林, sculpture version 雕刻版, 1957, 9.

In February 1957, *Jiyou* magazine started the discussion topic of “Are all postage stamps worth collecting?”. In the cover page (see Figure 11 (a)) of this volume, there is a postage stamp (see Figure 11 (b)) featured with a professional doctor. Using the black and white colors, this image pictured the close-up of this doctor’s hand in holding a test tube, which clearly indicated the devotion of a “worker” at his workplace. In addition, by depicting how the doctor’s eyes focused on the test tube, the facial expression of this doctor is also vivid for the viewers. In April 1957, the cover page (see Figure 12 (a)) of this volume used seven postage stamps (see Figure 12 (b)) of different sport activities. No matter in playing soccer or swimming, these stamps depicted the human body with

clear outline. To some extent, it not only indicated the physical power of Chinese people, but also underline the hope for building a healthy and strong country. In May 1957, the cover image (see Figure 13 (a)) used a postage stamp (see Figure 13 (b)) featured with a black-and-white mountain scene. In this stamp, it also depicted a curved road on the huge mountain. Especially, the cars driving on this road reveals the techniques development of China in socialist period.

All these postage stamps, as the cover pages during the discussion of “Are all postage stamps worth collecting?” in *Jiyou* magazine, are created and published by People’s Republic of China in socialist period. Meanwhile, no matter these stamps featured with doctors, sportsman or mountain scene, they all closely related to the construction of socialist business in PRC. As Phil Deans and Hugo Dobson once argued, “Stamps can and should be read as texts, often with expressly political purpose or agenda which are conveyed through the images they depict”⁵⁵. “Postage stamps”, they continued, “emerge as vehicles for identity creation and propagation, and as mechanisms for regime legitimation. They demonstrate changing concepts of the state over time and the changing aspirations of state elites”⁵⁶. Therefore, by using these certain postage stamps as propaganda in cover pages, to some extent, *Jiyou* magazine not only

⁵⁵ Deans Phil and Hugo Dobson. *Introduction: East Asian Postage Stamps as Socio-Political Artefacts*. East Asia 22. 2005, (2) 3-7.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

confirms its loyalty towards the political power in official voice, but also indicates what stamps actually are considered to be “worthy to collect”.

In this section, regards to the criteria for the philately, based on the close-reading of the primary archives of *Jiyou* magazine from February to June 1957, I focused on the first discussion of “Are all postage stamps worth collecting?”. After analyzing how the official voice and individual voice are intertwined together and the complicated role of *Jiyou* magazine, I further illustrated how the visual image of postage stamps in cover pages can serve as a clue to answer the question of what stamps can be considered as “worthy” to be collected. In the last section, this section will continue to research how the discourse related to the philately is interpreted by *Jiyou* magazine, and how this trajectory might be manipulated by political power.

3.4 The Class Struggle in Collecting Stamps: The Following Discussion in *Jiyou* Magazine

With the process of the discussion of “Are all postage stamps are worthy to collect?”, different opinions related to the criteria of collecting stamps further ignited people to engage in following debates of “How should philatelist treat postage stamps from Capitalist country? (*Jiyouzhe Zenyang Duidai Zibenzhuyi Guojia de Youpiao*)”⁵⁷. In this section, focusing on analyzing the discourses in interpreting the philately, I aim to

⁵⁷ Zhonghua Quanguo Jiyou Lianhe Hui 中华全国集邮联合会, Renmin Youdian Chubanshe 人民邮电出版社, Zhongguo Jiyou Chubanshe 中国集邮出版社. *Jiyouzhe Zenyang Duidai Zibenzhuyi Guojia de Youpiao*? 集邮者怎样对待资本主义国家的邮票? *Ji You* 集邮. 1958, 10.

further explore how collect stamps were gradually related to class struggle. In other words, how the philately and “class character (*jijie xing*)” and “revolutionary meaning (*geming yiyi*)”⁵⁸ started to be connected in official and individual voices. In addition, the complicated role of *Jiyou* magazine will be analyzed throughout close reading of the texts and visual analysis of its cover pages.

Starting from October 1958, *Jiyou* magazine began the following-up discussion of “How should philatelist treat postage stamps from Capitalist country?”. There are a series of articles, such as “Collecting stamps has class character (*Jiyou shiyou Jiejixing de*)” and “(We) should collect stamps from class perspective (*Yingdang Yunyong Jieji Guandian Yangde Xuanze*)”. For example, in the article wrote by Fang Yuan, “(We) should collect stamps from class perspective”, he argued that:

Stamps are not only small works of art, but also tools for publicity and education. The issue of stamps is in the hands of the bourgeoisie and serves the bourgeoisie. Stamps that promote political events do not need to say that even stamps issued to commemorate sports games and fairs are branded as bourgeoisie⁵⁹.

邮票不但是小型艺术品，而且是宣传教育的工具。邮票发行工作掌握在资产阶级手里，是为资产阶级服务的。宣传政治事件的邮票不必说，即使为纪念运动会、博览会而发行的邮票，也都打上了资产阶级的烙印⁶⁰。

.....

Of course, the stamps we treat in capitalist countries are mainly considered from the class nature of stamps, but the attitude of capitalist countries to stamps of socialist countries can also serve as a reference for us. Therefore, when we consider this issue, we should be in charge of politics, stand on the proletarian

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid. (Translated from Chinese version)

⁶⁰ Ibid.

stand, and strictly choose stamps. As for stamps in imperialist countries, there are very few desirable elements, so there is no need to collect it⁶¹.

当然，我们对待资本主义国家的邮票，主要是从邮票的阶级性来考虑，但是资本主义国家对到社会主义国家邮票的态度，也可以作为我们的参考。因此，我们在考虑这个问题时，就应该政治挂帅，站在无产阶级立场上，严格地加以选择。对于帝国主义国家的邮票，可取的成分极少，就没有必要收集它⁶²。

In the last section, I analyzed the trajectory related to what stamps are “worthy” to be collected, especially using the Chen Zhongkui’s opinion as an example. At here, I aim to use Fang Yuan’s article to analyze how the philately fosters class struggle. Instead of discussing what kind of stamps are “worthy” to collect, Fang Yuan marked the bourgeoisie character of creating and publishing stamps in capitalist countries at the beginning of his article. Furthermore, by claiming that how to treat stamps from capitalist countries has to be “considered from the class nature of stamps”⁶³, he endows the philately with high political meaning and significance in socialist China. To some extent, for him, collecting stamps is not a simple question of whether collecting an object which is worthy or not. Instead, philately became a symbolic weapon to defeat China’s capitalist enemies on the ideological battlefield. In other words, choosing stamps must be based on “the proletarian stand”, therefore “there is no need to collect” any stamps from capitalist countries⁶⁴.

⁶¹ Ibid. (Translated from Chinese version)

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

Later in February 1959, *Jiyou* magazine also published several opinions related to the discussion of “How should philatelist treat postage stamps from Capitalist country?”. For example, there are opinions:

(Zhang Zheren) I think we can collect the first two types of stamps from nationally independent countries and friendly neutral countries. However, is it that the stamps of other countries simply object to the collection? I don't think so. It should be a more cautious attitude to “take the essence and go to its dross.” However, I also believe that only the stamps of the United States, South Korea and South Vietnam should be firmly opposed to the collection⁶⁵.

（张哲人）我认为我们可以收集那些民族独立国家和友好的中立国家的前两类邮票。但是，是不是其他国家的邮票就干脆反对收集呢？我认为也不能这样，应该是采取更慎重得多的态度去”取其精华，去其糟粕”。但是，我又认为，唯有美国、南朝鲜和南越的邮票应该坚决反对收集⁶⁶。

(Shengdian) I think that all the stamps issued by the imperialist countries are class and reactionary, that is, flowers, animals, and sports tickets are no exception. In order to maintain and strengthen their reactionary rule in the country and the territories, the imperialist countries tried their best to make the people not ask politics, do not care about the world, and all kinds of sports, flowers, and animal tickets officially have this purpose. These apolitical stamps sing a (classless) melody/tone that surpasses class. They would like to utilize philately to separate people from the polemics of politics. ⁶⁷.

（盛典）我认为帝国主义国家发行的一切邮票都带有阶级性和反动性，就是花卉、动物、体育票也不例外。帝国主义国家为了维护和加强其在国内和属地的反动统治，因此，竭力想使人民变得不过问政治，不关心天下大事，而形形色色的体育、花卉、动物票正式有着这个目的的，它们高唱着集邮是超阶级的调子，想利用集邮支使人民钻进脱离政治的牛角尖⁶⁸。

(Zhang Daqi) We don't just look at the politics of capitalist countries, we also appreciate the art and skills of their country's beauty and the crystallization of the art of carving people. Some people think that animals, plants, cultural life and art stamps do not need to be collected. I think that animal and plant stamps

⁶⁵ Zhonghua Quanguo Jiyou Lianhe Hui 中华全国集邮联合会, Renmin Youdian Chuban She 人民邮电出版社, Zhongguo Jiyou Chuban She 中国集邮出版社. *Jiyouzhe Zenyang Duidai Zibenzhuyi Guojia de Youpiao?* 集邮者怎样对待资本主义国家的邮票? *Ji You* 集邮. 1959, 2. (Translated from Chinese version)

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

reflect everything in nature, reflecting the characteristics of the world's flora and fauna, as well as the world's inspiratory flora and fauna, expanding our knowledge and understanding of the universe. Stamps that reflect cultural life can also be collected, but care must be taken not to cultural life in the American way of life, nor in the "nude like" stamps that are ridiculous and numb. Some people say that political stamps are not allowed. Of course, some mean war, stamps with reactionary toxins can be discarded, no need to select, but some can also be collected⁶⁹.

（张达齐）我们不单纯看资本主义国家的政治，也要欣赏他们国家美的艺术、技巧以及劳动人民雕画艺术的结晶。有些人认为动物、植物、反应文化生活以及艺术的邮票不需要集。我认为动植物邮票反应了大自然的一切东西，反映出世界动植物的特色，以及世界各种吸气的动植物，能够扩展我们的知识领域和了解宇宙间的一些东西。反应文化生活的邮票，也可以集来欣赏，但须注意不要那些美国生活方式的文化生活，也不应该集那些荒淫、肉麻的“裸体像”邮票。有人说反应政治的邮票要不得。当然有些意味着战争，有反动毒素的邮票，可以舍弃，不必选集，但是有些也可以收集⁷⁰。

In fact, most readers agreed with Fang Yuan in choosing stamps must be based on "the proletarian stand", and "there is no need to collect" any stamps from capitalist countries, such as Sheng Dian. He also argued that: "all the stamps issued by the imperialist countries are classness and reactionary (counter-revolution character)" ⁷¹. For Sheng Dian, stamps from capitalist countries, which are featured with apolitical images, such as trees, flowers or animals, are aimed to "make the people not ask politics" and "do not care about the world", thus influencing people's political devotion and participation.

On the contrary, for Zhang Daqi, "animal and plant stamps reflect everything in nature, reflecting the characteristics of the world's flora and fauna, as well as the world's

⁶⁹ Ibid. (Translated from Chinese version)

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

inspiratory flora and fauna”⁷². Even though these postage stamps come from capitalist countries, Daiqi argued that it can still enrich “our knowledge the universe”⁷³. This different understanding also appears in Zhang Zheren’s description of treating stamps from capitalist countries. For Zhang, so-called capitalist countries also need to be reconsidered. Especially, he concluded the attitudes in facing capitalist stamps, by claiming that “It should be a more cautious attitude to “take the essence and go to its dross”⁷⁴. To some extent, no matter Sheng Dian, Zhang Daqi or Zhang Zheren, they all share the similar opinion with Fang Yuan—treat the stamps from capitalist countries with class awareness. Therefore, the different individual voices related to this discussion topic all echoes the official voice of *Jiyou* magazine.

After analyzing the trajectory of following up discussion of *Jiyou* magazine in late 1950s, I illustrated how different individual voices influenced by the official voice. Though there are some differences among them, the similarity of readers’ opinion with Fang Yuan’s argument of the class character of the philately indicates the fact that political power increasingly shapes the language in socialist China. By examining the visual image of cover section during this period, this section will further explore how the image of postage stamps becomes more and more political-orientated.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.



(a)

(b)

Figure 14: (a) The cover page of *Jiyou* magazine in October 1958; (b) *Rencao Diqiu Weixing* 人造地球卫星, designed by Sun Chuanzhe 孙传哲, sculpture version 雕刻版. 1958, 10.



(a)

(b)

Figure 15: (a) The Cover Page of *Jiyou* Magazine in February 1959; (b) *Woguo Diyige Yuanzi Fanyingdui he Huixuan Jiasu qi* 我国第一个原子反应堆和回旋加速器, designed by Sun Chuanzhe 孙传哲, sculpture version 雕刻版, 1958, 12.

In October 1958, the cover page (see Figure 14 (a)) of *Jiyou* magazine included two postage stamps (see Figure 14 (b)), depicting the aviation process of socialist China. With one stamp pictured rocket and another stamp pictured artificial satellite, these images clearly serve as political propaganda in promoting the nationalism among Chinese people and increasing competitive ability of PRC during the Cold War —

between socialist country and capitalist country. In February 1959, there is also one postage stamp (see Figure 15 (b)) used in cover image (see Figure 15 (a)), which depicted the nuclear reactor. This time, the image not only embedded with political significance but also military meanings.

In this section, based on the close-reading of the primary archives of *Jiyou* magazine from October 1958 to February 1959, I focused on the following-up discussion of “How should philatelist treat postage stamps from Capitalist country?”. I illustrated how different individual voices influenced by the official voice of *Jiyou* magazine. By examining the visual image of cover section during this period, this section also analyzes how official voice of *Jiyou* magazine interpreted the philately from class position.

3.5 Conclusion

Based on the primary archives of *Jiyou (Philately)* magazine, this section explored how language plays an important role in shaping the power relations between the official voice and different individual voices. Focusing on series of article and cover images in discussing topics, such as “Are all postage stamps worth collecting?” and “How should we treat postage stamps from Capitalist country?”, this section analyzed how the official voice and different individual voices influenced by each other, and the complicated role of *Jiyou* journal played in philately in early period of People’s Republic of China (PRC).

In Section 3.2, focusing on the first article and cover image of *Jiyou* magazine, I analyzed how the use of activity (*huodong*) and the connection with workers legitimates the philately in socialist China, and how the image of certain stamp reveals the official position of *Jiyou* magazine.

In Section 3.3, regards to the criteria for the philately, I illustrated the first discussion of “Are all postage stamps worth collecting?” with different opinions. I not only analyzed how the official voice and individual voice are intertwined together and the complicated role of *Jiyou* magazine, but also demonstrated how the visual image of postage stamps in cover pages can serve as a clue to answer the question of what stamps can considered as “worth collecting”.

In Section 3.4, I focused on the following-up discussion of “How should philatelist treat postage stamps from Capitalist country?”. I also illustrated how different individual voices influenced by the official voice. By examining the visual image of cover section during this period, this section also analyzes how official voice of *Jiyou* magazine interpreted the philately from class position.

To summarize, by analyzing different trajectories related to philately in *Jiyou* journal, I hope this section can shed a light on the intertwined relationships between art and politics, language and power in socialist China.

4. Revisiting “Political Pop” artist—Wang Guangyi: Examining modernism & postmodernism in 1990s China

I view art as a product of faith... I think that the presence of something mysterious is necessary for art. When art loses its sense of mystery, it becomes a mere craft, and this is why I have always been a defender of traditional artistic values.⁷⁵

—Wang Guangyi

“In China, postmodernity has been just an alternative version of modernity. Postmodernists was perceived as a newer version of modernity proper, instead of as an essential critique of it or a break with it.”⁷⁶

—Gao Minglu

4.1 Introduction

For most Chinese people, the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), as a political movement, was a disaster. Ironically, it is also Cultural Revolution which became the most abundant resources for artists to explore different ways to retell history again. Jiang Jiehong pointed out the importance of Cultural Revolution to Chinese contemporary art: “Indeed, without this particular reference, a great revolution that touches people to their very souls, one would have seen a completely different platform of contemporary art practice in China. The influence that an artist received from the experience can be very concrete to every single practice, including the style, the technical skills, the media and the manner of execution”⁷⁷. A contemporary Chinese artist, Xu Bing, even claimed that “if one tries to distinguish contemporary art in mainland China

⁷⁵ Yan Shanchun, *Wang Guangyi Interview*.

⁷⁶ Gao Minglu, *Post-Utopian Avant-garde Art in China*. Erjavec, Aleš, and Boris Grois. *Postmodernism and the Postsocialist Condition: Politicized Art Under Late Socialism*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 2003.

⁷⁷ Jiang Jiehong and Inc ebrary. *Burden or Legacy: From the Chinese Cultural Revolution to Contemporary Art*. Hong Kong University Press. Hong Kong, 2007.

from that in Hong Kong, Taiwan or other regions, the baptism of the Cultural Revolution would be the key"⁷⁸. Considering this, it is not difficult to imagine the popularity of using political-historical images from Cultural Revolution in paintings. Wang Guangyi, whose artworks includes *Mao Zedong: AO* and *the Great Criticism* series, is one of the most representative contemporary Chinese artists in exploring Cultural Revolution in a creative way. Wang Guangyi's most famous artworks were created in 1980s and 1990s, which ignited an intense debate in academic circles about its popularity and significance in art history and culture studies.

In this section, I revisit Wang Guangyi's artworks in late 1980s and 1990s from a critical perspective by considering the complicated relationships between modernism and postmodernism in China. By reexamining Wang Guangyi's *Mao Zedong: AO* with his declaration of "clearing out humanistic zeal", I hope to clarify the ironic relations between artist's himself intention and viewers' reactions. Later, by tracing different trajectory of critical reviews on Wang Guangyi's *Great Criticism* series, this section will illustrate how the *Great Criticism* series is misread in different ways due to its ambiguous referential meanings. In the end, by criticizing the use of so-called "Political Pop" to label Wang Guangyi's artworks, I will demonstrate the artist's pursuit in retelling history in a certain time represents not only to add a different genre to Chinese

⁷⁸ Kaye N and Bing X. *Cultural Transmissions. an Interview with Xu Bing*. Performance Research. 1998, (3) 44-51.

contemporary art, but also reveals a Chinese intellectual's reflection of Cultural Revolution in the post-socialist and post-revolutionary context. By conducting a specific research of Wang Guangyi's artworks and its cultural background, in this section, I hope to reveal a different way to reconsider the significance of Wang's work in understanding the entangled modernism and postmodernism in Chinese art.

4.2 Ironic Success of Mao Zedong: AO

Regarding the cultural background of Chinese contemporary art, from the early 1980s onwards, the styles of modern western art that have had the strongest influence on China include realist art (such as Andrew Wyeth and Alex Colville), which is not modern art, and the post-impressionism of early modernism. According to a Chinese art historian, Yi Ying, all these styles "fit the academic background of Chinese artists" and "met the need for local realism"⁷⁹. However, this revision could neither provide "a true avant-garde idea", nor reflect "the pursuit of democracy and freedom underneath the avant-garde style"⁸⁰. It is not hard to imagine the impasses of art at that time —how to use western art modes to explore the post-socialist and post-revolutionary reality of China. Huang Zhuan also pointed out that, "The question of how a subject without subjectivity (reflexivity) could critically construct a subject content became an unprovable, cyclical question for 1980s art" (Huang 24). In this sense, it is tempting to say

⁷⁹ Wiseman Mary B. and Liu Yuedi. *Subversive Strategies in Contemporary Chinese Art*. Leiden, Boston: Brill. 2011, 33.

⁸⁰Ibid.

that the modern art movement of 1980s China remained confined by enlightenment thinking and idealism, which influences many Chinese artists when they experiment, especially with how to retell Chinese past history, including especially the Cultural Revolution. Interestingly, the emergence of one art movement started to catch Chinese viewers and critics' eyes—Pop Art⁸¹.

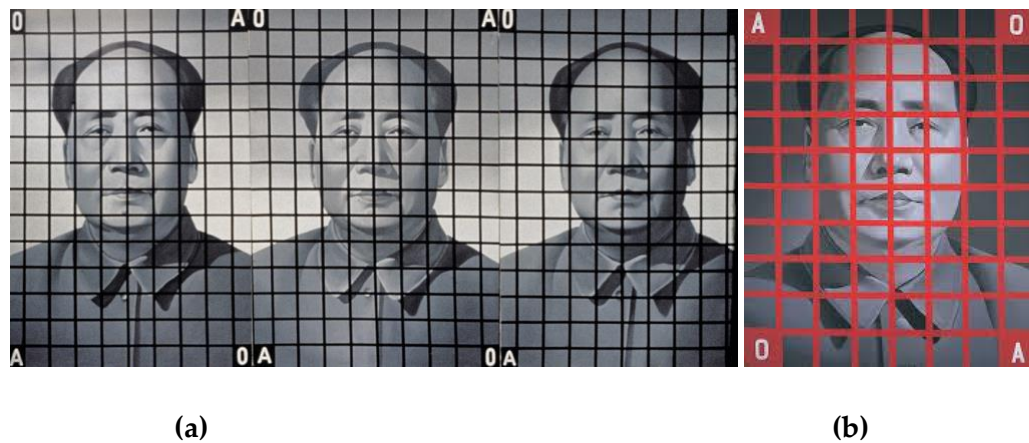


Figure 16: (a) *Mao Zedong: AO, 1988, oil on canvas, 360 × 120cm; (b) *Mao Zedong: AO, 1988, oil on canvas, 147 × 117cm.**

One representative “Pop Art” artist is Wang Guangyi (1957-), who has already explored a typical geometrical abstract painting in his early time at the Northern Art Group. Typically, the black abstract structure implies the spiritual quandary and the

⁸¹ According to Huang, The Pop art that arose in post-war America had two distinct backgrounds, one in cultural history and one in art history. The first refers to the nourishment it garnered from the mass-popularization and utilitarian aesthetics tradition of American culture, and was a physical reaction to the fragmented, superficial, trivial consumer culture that emerged after the Second World War. The second established the rejection of the elitist styles of modernism such as Abstract Expressionism. Warhol's visit to China in the early 1980s, and most importantly Robert Rauschenberg's solo exhibitions in Beijing and Lhasa in 1985 initiated the spread of American Pop ideas. For more details, refers to Huang Zhuan, “*Wei Guangqing: yi zhong Lishi hua de Boqu Zhuayi*” [Wei Guangqing: A Historicized Form of Pop], in *Zuo Tu You Shi* [Interplay of Images and History] (Guangdong: Lingnan Fine Arts Publishing House, 2007), 1.

imprisoned thought of people (see Figure 16 (a) and (b)). Though continuing this abstract artistic painting, Wang consciously encountered with Pop Art, such as the black grids with specific images. Nevertheless, it is also necessary to notice his use of political-historical images from Cultural Revolution. With the red or black grids intentionally placed on the top of Mao Zedong's face, which is clearly different from previous Mao's portrait, Wang Guangyi's *Mao Zedong: AO* began using political iconography as materials for analysis. Though as early as 1980s, in his *Post-Classical* series, Wang has already started to revisit the manuscript of Chinese history to form as a part of cultural criticism. In 1988, different from *Black Rationality* and *Red Rationality*, for *Mao Zedong: AO*, it is the first time that Wang Guangyi reused Mao's image in oil painting after the end of Cultural Revolution. Later in 1989, Wang Guangyi's *Mao Zedong* appeared in the exhibition *China Avant-garde* at the China National Art Gallery in Beijing. Non-surprisingly, it stimulated a heated controversy and criticism among Chinese artists and critics circles, even before its public exhibition. The central exhibiting location in this famous gallery for Wang Guangyi's artworks clearly indicated its prominence and importance in the avant-garde movement at that time.

Interestingly, different from public and critics' enthusiastic towards his artworks, Wang Guangyi himself was more or less concerned the underlying reason for popularity of *Mao Zedong: AO*. He noted later after the exhibition:

"I was very worried at that time that people might only see my Mao Zedong politically appealing. I believed that the work Mao Zedong would definitely

draw the media's attention, with no doubt. But this was not my intention. What I really wanted to achieve through art is to invite people neutrally and critically to be an organic development of my art practice, exploring the special cultural attitude of 'the people', including workers, peasants, soldiers and intellectuals, towards Mao Zedong, their leader of the past. The 'humanistic zeal' ignited by Mao Zedong reflects my vision that I proposed last year in terms of 'reassessing the humanistic zeal'⁸².

As Wang cautioned, from painting Mao's image in a non-traditional or non-official way, the "humanistic zeal" is exactly what he intended to reassess. Instead of indicating any political attitudes by reusing political leader's image, as Huang Zhuan later pointed out, Wang's works aim "to break from the established semantic expectation and aesthetics judgments that this iconography evokes in the observer" (Huang 39). Ironically, in an indirect way, the popularity of Wang Guangyi's works reflects the enthusiasm of critics who held strong "humanistic zeal"⁸³. The "neutrally" and "critically" argued by artist himself actually call for us to reconsider the proposal—"humanistic zeal", which is originated from the 1985's New Wave. Before distinguishing the complicated position of Wang Guang with most 85 New Wave's artists, it is necessary to review this art movement's historical background first.

Initially, the emergence of 1985's New Wave was a largely unofficial self-actuating movement. However, because there was not significant mediation between some of its leading members and official circles, the boundary between the official events and the unofficial artist movements started to be blurred and hard to distinguish.

⁸² Wang Guangyi, *On the Issue of Originality in Contemporary Art Practice*, artist's unpublished notes. 1990, 24.

⁸³ Influenced by "humanistic zeal", at that time, some Chinese intellectual viewed Wang Guangyi's portrait of Mao Zedong with enlightening thinking and nostalgia feeling.

Therefore, as Paul Gladston pointed out, “much of the 85 New Wave’s criticism of the CCP was aimed not at current political events but at those of the Cultural Revolution” (Gladston 191). It is not difficult to understand that most critics tend to regard 1985s New Wave as an art movement that aimed to deconstruct the previous idealized communism goal, or even a political gesture in full support of Deng’s program of Great Reform in 1980s. Nevertheless, from my perspective, it is possible that some artists, such as Wang Guangyi and Yu Youhan, have a far more complicated relation with this artistic movement. For example, Yu himself once discussed his ideas in making a series of painting incorporating images of Mao Zedong at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s as follows:

“When I painted the Mao series, though I cherished the Maoist period, I also held more reflective and critical feelings about that period too. So, some paintings, which may appear to be a form of bohemian realist art, didn’t express optimistic feelings at all. Instead, they were trying to reveal feelings about the betrayal of socialism. I think the Mao series of Pop painting should belong to the history of China’s folk or historical paintings. In these paintings, the background colors are very bright. But, if you look carefully, there are unstable elements in the background suggesting that disaster may take place at any time. As for my feeling towards Mao, though I no longer admires him as I used to during the Cultural Revolution, I did not think we should deny him totally. And I don’t think Western propaganda about Mao is right either. I think every leader would like to lead their country toward a better future”⁸⁴.

That said, it would also be wrong to assume that all artists involved in the production of “avant-garde” art in 1985’s New Wave, held the enthusiastic for

⁸⁴ Gladston Paul. *Contemporary Art in Shanghai: Conversations with Seven Chinese Artists*. Hong Kong: Blue Kingfisher. 2011.

“humanistic zeal”. For instance, Wang Guangyi also explained his decision to use political images such as that of Mao Zedong by saying:

“I had wanted to provide a basic method for clearing out humanist passions through the creation of Mao Zedong, but when Mao Zedong was shown at the China avant-garde Exhibition, observers multiplied the humanist passion by a hundredfold to imbue Mao Zedong with even more sentimental value... Mao Zedong touched on the question of politics. Though I was avoiding this question at the time, it really touched on it. But I wanted to use an artistic method to resolve it; a neutral attitude is a step better than an artistic method”⁸⁵.

Reflecting the ironic success of *Mao Zedong: AO*, which is clearly contradicted to Wang Guangyi’s initial intention to reconsider “humanistic zeal”, at this point, Wang’s “neutral” attitudes can be regarded as an important way to deal with politics and ideology—keeping calm at enthusiastic atmosphere in late 1980s. As Huang Zhuan argued that, “This neutral attitude is not detachment; instead it indicates that art can only make effective judgment about political events and history after it has removed specific political standpoints and all emotional involvement (humanist passions)” (Huang 41). Considering this, it is exactly by this way that artist “can naturally present the inherent significance and value of the works” (41).

When examining Wang Guangyi’s *Mao Zedong: AO* or other works in this series, this “neutral attitudes” can be reflected by his appropriation of pre-existing images, realistic portrayal and the reduction of the figure to a silhouette of pure outline. As Sara Boggio pointed out, “these signs are the logical conceptual prosecution of formal

⁸⁵ Lü Peng. *Tuxiang Xiuzheng yu Wenhua Piping* (Image Alteration and Cultural Criticism). in *Dangdai Yishu Chaoliu zhong de Wang Guangyi* (Wang Guangyi within the Trends of Contemporary Art). Sichuan: Sichuan Fine Arts Publishing House. 1992, 36.

solutions”, which “bears out the intention of analyzing the represented subject in a rational way, devoid of emotional involvement and aesthetic complacency” (Boggio 72). For example, the grids once used to enlarge the image of Mao during Cultural Revolution, and thus amplify its sacred nature, now become visible in Wang’s works. In this sense, “the artist’s choice to leave the grid visible is imputable to the reverse process: to re-dimension the figure of the leader” (72). In other words, from a “neutral” way, the “reverse process” is presented to humanize Mao’s figure, rather than mystify Mao. Therefore, in Wang Guangyi’s *Mao Zedong: AO*, far from being political claims, the signs and the letter are intended to “restore the suspension of judgment”, which is a necessary condition for both observers and artists to reactivate the “neutral” and “critical” thinking. Due to Wang Guangyi and Yu Youhan’s “neutral” attitudes, to some extent, they are the one who were really capable to reflect the burdens of Chinese history and the reality of current China in a critical way.

In this section, from analyzing the cultural background of Chinese art in 1980s, I illustrated how enlightenment thinking and idealism still remains as a form of “humanistic zeal” for many artist and critics, which is called by Wang Guangyi’s *Mao Zedong: AO* to reconsider this enthusiastic political feeling. By quoting Wang Guangyi’s explanation of his intention in using Mao’s image with grid, which contrast to most viewers’ reactions to and the reception of “*Mao Zedong: AO*”, I intended to analyze the ironic success of this artwork. By taking a close look at the 1985 New Wave in Chinese

contemporary art history, I further demonstrated the distinguished meaning of Wang's art in reconsidering "humanistic zeal" in 1980s. By analyzing the "neutral" and "critical" attitudes purposed by Wang, my argument is more or less different from previous trajectory of allocating Wang into a part of 1985 New Wave. As numerous commentators, including Köppel-Yang and Paul Gladston have suggested, it was possible to view some artists, especially Wang Guangyi, as a complicated case in making use of historical-political images. Nevertheless, there are still a lot of misunderstandings of Wang Guangyi's artworks in 1980s. In next section, different misreading of Wang's artworks will be addressed and analyzed in detail.

4.3 Misreading of the Great Criticism series

The modern art movement of 1980s China remained confined by enlightenment thinking and idealism, while the 1990s enlightenment project of establishing subjectivity was met with confrontational attitudes. For political reasons, in the 1990s Chinese society quickly completed its transformation from an enlightened culture to a consumer culture⁸⁶, and Chinese artists, still dramatically disturbed by the failure of cultural unfamiliar economic system. Huang Zhuan once clarified about the influence of transformed cultural background in 1990s: "The loss of ideals and critical identity left

⁸⁶ Using "an enlightened culture" (qimeng wenhua) at there, I refer how "humanistic zeal" and "enlightenment thinking" remain popular in art and literature fields in 1980s.

artists at the mercy of chaos, suspended between the constructive enlightenment of modernism and the opposing postmodern tendencies” (Huang 39).



Figure 17: *Great Criticism: Coca Cola*, 1990, oil on canvas, 200 × 200cm.

All of these led to Pop Art in China being embraced as the natural choice of the time. This acceptance of western pop in China originated in searching alternative ways to approach past and present history. Rather than western Pop Art’s deconstructing the original images or constructing new meanings, Chinese political pop underscore a possibility to perceive politics, economic and cultural issues in different perspectives, creating a far more complicated case. However, there are several critics misread its underlying meaning in different ways. For example, as soon as it came out, Wang Guangyi’s *Great Criticism* series (see Figure 17) was illustrated only as an alternative “linguistic prompt tied to contemporary life”.

“In *Great Criticism*, familiar historical forms have been deftly linked to what were once irreconcilable popular contemporary icons, sending a hopelessly tangled metaphysical problem into suspension. With the language of Pop Art, the artist has named a contemporary problem: so-called history is a linguistic prompt tied

to contemporary life; *Great Criticism* is one of the best examples of such a linguistic prompt to come out of the early 1990s"⁸⁷.

In 1992, within the oil paintings section in China Guangzhou-First '90s Art Biennial, the *Great Criticism* series by Wang Guangyi won the Document Award, the greatest academic acknowledgement by Chinese art critics. However, regarding the significance of the *Great Criticism* series only lie in a "linguistic prompt" which is "tied to contemporary life", this award represents a possible misreading of Wang's artwork, which neglects the potential tensions exists in this artwork.

Instead of "humanistic zeal" behind the popularity of Wang Guangyi's artworks in 1980s, which this section has already discussed before, the question is that why his later artworks in 1990, especially the *Great Criticism* series, ignited such a wide-spread discussion both inside and even outside of art circle, and what are the underlying reason for the misreading of Wang Guangyi's artworks. This section will attempt to address these questions by analyzing the trajectory of different critics' arguments related to Wang Guangyi's artworks—the *Great Criticism* series. From critiquing their arguments, I intend to disentangle the complicated debates related to Wang Guangyi, thus claim my own understanding of the importance of his artworks.

Basically, there are two opposite attitudes among scholars who criticized Wang's using of political-historical images. On the one hand, for some scholars, such as Wang

⁸⁷ *Lixiang yu Caozuo: Zhongguo Guangzhou—Shoujie Jiushi Niandai Yishu Shuangnianzhan Youhua Bufen* (Ideals and Operation: China Guangzhou-First '90s Art Biennial, oil Painting Segment). Sichuan: Sichuan Fine Arts Publishing House. 1992, 104.

Xiaoming, Wang Guangyi's artworks appropriate western Pop Art artistic techniques to present political and ideological problems in China's previous historical period, which can be treated as a way of self-Orientalization to satisfy the western gaze. On the other hand, some scholars, such as Geremie. R. Barmé, in a consideration of Wang Guangyi's artwork, especially the *Great Criticism* series, pointed out that "When...irony itself is commodified and used 'to grease the wheels of commerce, not...to resist its insidious effects, the cultural significance of market-orientated dissent deeply disturbing"⁸⁸. For Barmé, the possible market-orientation of Wang Guangyi's artworks is disturbing to consider.

Briefly, Wang Xiaoming held the idea that Wang's strategy is nothing more than an artistic strategy of taking advantage of political problems, which is trapped in satisfying a western and neo-colonialist gaze. For Barmé, Wang's problem lies in its market-orientated strategy which decline its importance in cultural and ideological critics. No matter how much political meaning embedded in the *Great Criticism* series, they all critiqued the drawbacks of Wang Guangyi's artworks in dealing ideological issues in a lighthearted way. From personal perspective, these two kinds of critics both misread Wang Guangyi's artworks in different ways. First, from the beginning of creating the *Great Criticism* series, Wang Guangyi has already argued his attitudes

⁸⁸ Barmé Geremie and Inc NetLibrary. *Shades of Mao: The Posthumous Cult of the Great Leader*. NY: M.E. Sharpe, Armonk. 1996-1995, 23.

towards Cultural Revolution is rather more critical than obsessed with it. Once in an interview, Wang Guangyi shared his experience and understanding of Cultural Revolution, especially the role of artists played in portraying historical events in current context.

“The significance of Cultural Revolution, for me, does not coincide with most people’s viewpoint (their political and economic reading of it) ...That is because the viewpoint of most people might be more focused on the real results that might be brought about by an historical incident. As for the artist’s view, he tends to be more concerned with the complexity of the visual forms that are deprived from the historical incident. As the artist reveals this visual complexity, he is also be able to modify two different perspectives”⁸⁹.

Similarly, Yu Youhan, who also share the similar attitudes with Wang Guangyi, pointed out clearly his understanding of Cultural Revolution in artistic way. He argued that:

“I paint Mao Zedong in order to reflect China, history, and also the life that I experienced. But as an artist, these reflections are always visualized in my practice. The Chinese Economic Reform by Deng Xiaoping brought Chinese artists liberty, which allowed me to appropriate the image of Mao Zedong, the most important character in China’s modern history, in my paintings. Both my childhood and youth were spent in the Mao era, and I also experienced the Cultural Revolution. During the Cultural Revolution, China was filled with Mao’s images. More than a decade after the death of Mao, I decided to revisit Mao in my art practice. When I painted floral patterns allover Mao’s monochrome uniform in his standard portrait, I was pleased unprecedentedly. The words that had been suppressed for over ten years in my heart were finally expressed in full on the canvas. Mao’s image in my painting consists of a variety of meanings: Mao sometimes represents China, sometimes represents the East, sometimes represents culture; sometimes he is a leader, sometimes an avant-

⁸⁹ *Guanyu Shehui Zhuyi Shijie Jingyan—Wang Guangyi Fangtan Lu* (On the Socialist Visual Experience—Wang Guangyi Interview), *Shijie Zhengzhixue: Ling Yige Wang Guangyi* (visual Politics: Another Wang Guangyi). Guangdong: Lingnan Fine Arts Publishing House. 2008, 201.

garde, sometimes a conservative, and sometimes indeed, only a series of decorative pattern..."⁹⁰.

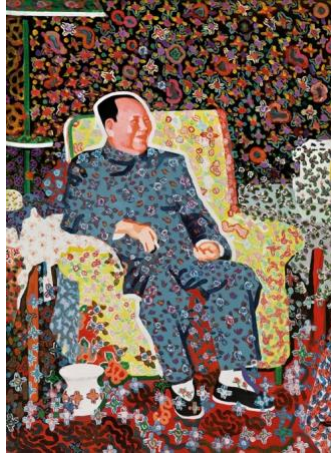


Figure 18: MAO, 1993, acrylic on canvas, 84.5 × 62.5cm.

From Wang Guangyi and Yu Youhan's own narrations, they did not mention the "Political Pop"⁹¹ at all. The label of "Political Pop" is more likely a belated mark from critics. Clearly, rather than participating in Pop Art on purpose, Wang and Yu embraced Pop Art to approach past and present in a new artistic way. Therefore, I doubted Wang Xiaoming's critique in Wang Guangyi's purposed appropriation of western Pop Art. Instead of satisfying western gaze for oriental political-historical problems, the artist himself did not conceive a western audience during his artistic creating process.

⁹⁰ Lü Peng, *Zhongguo Dangdai Yishushi: 1990-1999* (A History of Chinese Contemporary Art: 1990- 1999). Changsha: Hunan Fine Arts Publishing House. 2000, 175.

⁹¹ "Political Pop" is viewed as "a combination of American pop art and Chinese politics (icons of Mao, etc.); the juxtaposition of "ontologically different worlds" on a depthless surface (e.g., commercial billboards next to or on top of images of revolutionary workers, peasants, and soldiers)" This definition will be explained in next section.

Secondly, as for Barmé's critics of Wang Guangyi's market-orientated strategy, it is more or less a misreading due to the popularity of his artworks in international market. Obviously, from the above quote from Wang Guangyi, the artist himself did not consciously bear in mind a possible consumer, too. More importantly, from the analysis of Wang's artistic importance in juxtaposing political symbol with consumer signs in the early part of this section, it is clear that Wang held a serious artistic attitude towards his artworks. As himself emphasized in his interview, "When I positioned propaganda posters next to Coca-Cola, the spiritual goal was to create a connection between utopia and fetishism. I think that people should approach my provocation seriously, with the sense of the sacred"⁹². Also, contrary to Barmé's critics, though the *Great Criticism* series brought Wang great success, oddly, just as soon as it became revered by the market, politics and the international press, Wang himself declared his gave up of this artistic genre.

To further analyze the possible reason for the two misreading of Wang's the *Great Criticism* series, it is necessary to turn the spotlight to the historical and cultural background in 1990s. With the continuous Opening and Reform policy under Deng's government, it is tempting to say that China entered into a consumerism period at that time. The success of Wang Guangyi's artworks, which featured Mao and other representative figures in Cultural Revolution, actually serve as a start for the emerging

⁹² Yan Shanchun, *Wang Guangyi Interview*.

of “Mao Craze” (*Mao Re*). This might explain the positive reaction of inside and outside of art circles towards Wang’s artworks, which are copied and duplicated later in several forms. Though in a different way, the spread of Mao’s image, as Wang Ban’s analysis, is an indication of people’s nostalgia towards imagined past. He pointed out that, “People begin to reminisce the better days of socialist culture and even the idyllic native village, with an equally uncritical reputation of anything western and of anything associated with democratic society, civil rights, and individual freedom” (Wang 6).

In this sense, Wang Guangyi’s artworks in 1990s, especially the *Great Criticism* series, is an effort in exploring “neutral” interpretation of past and present history. At this point, it would be too simplistic to ascertain that the success of the *Great Criticism* series lies in the reason for Chinese people to express nostalgia towards Mao’s period and critique current capitalized system. Instead, by putting Mao’s image in a non-traditional way, Wang more or less intended to ignite people’s critical perception of Mao. By juxtaposing two diametrically opposed images —propaganda posters of the Cultural Revolution and Western consumer advertisements —within the same space, Wang Guangyi actually “foregrounds the pervasive commodity fetishism in the everyday life of post-socialist and post-revolutionary China as well as reexamine the legacy of the revolutionary Maoist past”⁹³. That said, the critical attitude of Wang

⁹³ Sheldon Hsiao-Peng Lu “*Global Postmodernization* “ from Dirlik, Arif, Xudong Zhang, and Duke University Press. *Postmodernism & China*. Duke University Press, Durham [N.C.], 2000.

Guangyi towards the “revolutionary Maoist past” and “commodity fetishism” at present are both embedded in his artworks.

Regarding to the *Great Criticism* series, the critical and neutral attitudes are constantly emphasized by Wang Guangyi himself. According to Maria Cannarella, the neutral treatment of the material, “does not aim at directing the reading of the work towards one fixed interpretation”; “it leaves space for possible misunderstanding in order to facilitate reflection that is free from prejudice” (Maria 98). Huang Zhuan also pointed out, this artwork’s intension “is not to provide a moral explanation, but instead to position the meta-narrative symbol represented here by the people in non-linear contradiction to the material symbol that is the product”, only in this way, “interpretations of the work remain more open” (Huang 157). He also argued the significance of the *Great Criticism* series, by saying that, it “forces images from China’s politics history to interact with the diametrically opposed images of western consumerism, and this is why it produces a new and effective form of critical power” (39). Therefore, briefly, in Wang’s artworks, the modification of two opposite perspective are not adopted as a way to cancel out each other’s’ ideological meanings. Instead, by juxtaposing both of them in an ironic way, the *Great Criticism* series in fact embody its titles’ meaning in providing a kind of criticism.

In this section, before affirming my own understanding of Wang Guangyi’s artworks, which I think is far more complicated in its referential meanings, I traced two

different critics' arguments towards the *Great Criticism* series, represented by Wang Xiaoming and Geremie. R. Barmé, who viewed it as either self-Orientalize or market-orientated. By analyzing their trajectory in light of Wang's self-interview, I argued that the two critics' readings of *Great Criticism* series remain to be doubted. In addition, putting Wang's *Great Criticism* series in a historical and cultural context in 1990s, by further analyzing people's nostalgia feeling towards imagined past life, I explored the possible reason for the popularity of Wang's works both inside and outside of art world. In the end, I illustrated the distinguished feature of *Great Criticism* series, which "revolutionary Maoist past" and "commodity fetishism" at present are both embedded in it. Contrary to Wang Xiaoming and Barmé's arguments, from my view, this artwork can undoubtedly be viewed as an important achievement in Chinese contemporary art.

4.4 "Political Art" or not: Modernism & Postmodernism

After discussing the possible misreading of Wang Guangyi's artworks, such as *Mao Zedong: AO* and the *Great Criticism* series in previous two sections. In this section, not only reexamining the definition of "Political Art", which normally labels Wang's works, but also comparing the differences between the representative western Pop artist, Andy Warhol, with Wang Guangyi, I attempt to reveal Wang's own personal understandings regarding to his artworks, such as *Mao Zedong : AO* and the *Great Criticism* series, with a dialogue to the intertwined modernism and postmodernism in Chinese contemporary art in 1980s and 1990s.

Emerging in later 1980s and early 1990s, “Political Pop” is viewed as “a combination of American pop art and Chinese politics (icons of Mao, etc.); the juxtaposition of “ontologically different worlds” on a depthless surface (e.g., commercial billboards next to or on top of images of revolutionary workers, peasants, and soldiers)”, which is “a trademark of postmodern art in Chinese style”⁹⁴. There is also other definition such as, in China, “Political Pop (which was strongly influenced by the work of Andy Warhol, Richard Hamilton and other Western Pop artists) is characterized by what are, on the face of it, deconstructionist juxtapositions of images from the Maoist period with others taken from differing sources, including imagery associated with global capitalism”(Gladston 191). By combing political-historical symbols, including slogans and images from the worker-peasant-soldier movements of the Cultural Revolution, with consumer signs, including the logos of Coca-Cola, Marlboro, Cadbury and other famous consumer brands imported from abroad, as soon as Wang Guangyi’s *Great Criticism* came out, they were extolled by most critics as a representative of Pop Art’s development in China— “Political Pop”. For most critics, following the steps of western Pop artists, such as Andy Warhol, Wang Guangyi became the poster boy for “Political Pop” in China.

⁹⁴ Lu, Sheldon H. “Art, Culture, and Cultural Criticism in Post-New China.” *New Literary History*, vol. 28, no. 1, 1997, pp. 111-133.

Nevertheless, the label of “Political Pop” cannot simply mark the features Wang Guangyi’s artworks, such as *Mao Zedong: AO* and the *Great Criticism* series. For example, when examining closely the *Great Criticism* series, the random sequence of numbers on the top of every painting are quite noticeable. This feature is also referred by Paul Gladston as “the flatness of the painting” (191). Instead of focusing on “extensive fields of unbroken color, large scale typefaces and cartoon-like depictions of soldiers, workers and peasants”, when viewers noticed the “repetitive confetti-like use of sequences of numbers”, as he observed, they actually indicate “contact phone numbers for various services are a commonplace addition to the walls of buildings, often overwriting murals promoting the CCP and its ideological agendas” (191). For Gladston, it is due to this application of number sequences in the *Great Criticism* series that not only “works as effective formal/decorative device (establishing the all-over flatness of the picture surface)”, but also “allows for the painting as a whole to be read as a mural in an urban setting” (191). It is because of this juxtaposing that Gladston examined the complicated referential meaning embedded in Wang Guangyi’s artwork. For him, on the one side, Wang’s *Great Criticism* series can be seen as a deconstructive force to reconsider the political-historical symbol and current commercialized culture; on the other side, these artworks all share the same concerns with traditional realism in modern Chinese art.

Using Gladston’s words in describing the importance of admitting this “adherence” of Wang’s artwork to realism tradition, “Wang’s combination of capitalist

and revolutionary imaginary begins to look like a deconstructive combination of opposing representations, and more like an attempt to objectively reflect the ideologically mixed reality of life in the PRC after the establishing of Deng's program of "Opening and Reform" (191). At this point, it also suggests Huang Zhuan's similar criticism in simplistic understanding of Wang's works as "Political Pop" in a postmodernism sense. For him, though without explicitly refer Wang's *Great Criticism* series as an extension of the realist tradition in China, he did argue that the painting occupies a 'non-standpoint' that relates objectively to both indigenous Chinese and external Westernized cultural, social and political perspectives. Similarly, other sections by Chinese critics on the subject of "Political pop" include Gu Chengfeng's "Tendencies in Chinese Pop"⁹⁵. In this sense, it is attempting to say the label of "Political Pop" to illustrate Wang Guangyi's artworks in a single way is doubtful.

More importantly, the difference between American and Chinese "Political Pop" cannot be ignored. As Yi Ying once wrote in *Political Pop Art and The Crisis of Originality*, regarding to "Political Pop", in the West, it was "considered as the art of consumerism, spectacle, and the era of image, while in China it provided a realistic reference instead". She pointed out directly that, "Being the symbol of modern western art, abstract art, to a degree, has largely been ignored by Chinese avant-garde

⁹⁵ Wu Hung, 1945, and Peggy Wang. *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*. Museum of Modern Art ; Distributed by Duke University Press, Durham, N.C;New York;, 2010.

movement" (Yi 22). For Yi, the question that why Chinese avant-garde cannot share the same concerns with western pop artist is hard to offer certain explanations. Considering the historical context of China, the possible answers might be that "the pre-industrial China lack not only the visual conditions and experiences of modern society, but also the classical and academic traditions to which abstract art opposed" (22). At this point, compared to western "Political Pop", Chinese contemporary artworks, especially Wang Gangyi's works, though share the similar features, yet cannot be only understood in a postmodernism way.

By taking a close look at representative "Political Pop" artworks in western art world and Chinese contemporary art world, Andy Warhol and Wang Guangyi's works, although they share some similar features, it is not difficult to find certain differences between them. As Huang Zhuan once wrote that, comparing to "Andy Warhol's parallel appropriation of ready-made images is a method that strips them meaning", for Wang Guangyi, "the strategy employed in the *Great Criticism* series is an iconographic requisition; its method consists of juxtaposing two semantically divergent images so as to render them paradoxical and generate an opposing meaning, which is not cancelled out, but modified"(Huang 156). In this sense, my previous analysis of Wang's proposal of "neutral" attitudes can be serve as an additional note for the "iconographic requisition". Interestingly, though adopting a deconstructing strategy in postmodernism mode—Pop Art, Wang's works nevertheless are a more complicated case in their pursuit

of a modernist aesthetic, such as modifying and creating meanings to recall historical concerns.

Moreover, different from Andy Warhol's reconstructive of consumer culture in capitalism society, Wang's use of the Cultural Revolution is subjecting the political-historical meaning into "a process of radical conceptualization" in order to "eliminate the possibility of aesthetic consumption". Especially since, as Huang argue, Wang did not use any "usual Pop techniques of image reproduction or collage", rather than "sticking instead to the traditional techniques of oil painting" (156). Different from Andy Warhol's postmodern art form, Wang's oil-oil-painting traditional form, leads to a certain tension, which is between reproduced image and the traditional "privileging of technique" (Walter Benjamin). By looking at Wang Guangyi's own declaration of his understanding of Andy Warhol and his own artworks, this deconstruction of the "Political Pop" label for Wang becomes even clearer. For example, in one interview, Wang said:

"I'm actually quite jealous of Warhol's purity and spontaneity, but there's something in my personality that always pulls me towards the unknown and the uncertain. This is a very painful experience, one that I must endure alone. The absence of meaning disseminated by Warhol can be connected to his choice of images. His images are not very meaningful, or perhaps they are meaningless. Though the forms are clear and the schema simple, they are not the result of a process of the professionalization of art. Deep down, they are the products of the universal decline in spirituality"⁹⁶.

⁹⁶ Yan Shanchun, *Wang Guangyi Interview*.

At first sight, it might be astonishing to read this kind of psychological disposition of a so-called “Pop artist”. Nevertheless, from the previous illustration of Wang Guangyi’s *Great Criticism*’s continuing of realism tradition, and its distinguishing features in contrary to Andy Warhol, it is understandable that the so-called “Political pop” might be a misnomer. Different from most critics who labeled Wang’s works as “Political pop” and viewed its importance only in postmodernism, I argue that Wang’s works engaged in a far more complicated case of localizing western art mode in 1980s and 1990s in China—the intersecting of modernism and postmodernism. At this point, I agreed with Huang Zhuan’s opinion. For example, he once pointed out that, “In terms of stylists, *Great Criticism* is a kind of half-way Pop, a variant Pop, one that seeks an alternative history beyond the one decided on by Pop; a history that produces meaning through the encounter of two specific ideological experiences: that of the global consumer culture and that of the specific historical period”(161). Briefly, the “half-way Pop” and “a variant Pop” is exactly the mixed features of Wang’s artworks, which also indicates its intertwined attitudes in dealing with modernism and postmodernism.

From Wang’s self-interview, it is fair to say that his artworks, such as the *Great Criticism* series, feature more modernism than postmodernism. It is exactly the “unknown and uncertain” feeling in Wang Guangyi’s heart, which is originated from specific experience in Chinese history, that he could never share the same pursuit of Warhol in “the absence of meaning”. To put in another way, the historical experiences of

Wang in pre-industrial China can never replace his hopefulness in art. Instead of claiming “the universal decline of spirituality” like Andy Warhol and other western pop artist, at least, Wang still believes firmly the meaning and importance of art. Later in the same interview, he gave a more clear and detailed description of the role of artist.

“People have a kind of primitive imagination and creativity...When someone creates something, and it is universally accepted and disseminated, it becomes a very important part of spiritual life or even everyday life... I think that my artworks embody this referential value; the images I use come from the people, and I think that the people can objectively read my works. My works indeed have certain mystical aspects that perhaps are not immediately attainable, but the basic meaning is clear and graspable. I did focus my efforts for a long time on removing ideas and perceptions that were strictly personal, in an effort to express shared concepts that belonged to the idea of collectivity. In reality, I can’t truly know what the people are thinking, but ever since *Great Criticism*, I have worked from this assumption. It is just a supposition; the artist loses all reasons for being. We are not scientists, nor are we thinkers or philosophers. We have no duty or need to disseminate objective knowledge to the public. What the artist should do is strive to imagine a world and imagine the meaning and relationship his works have with the public. The question of how things are in reality is really not my concerns”⁹⁷.

Similar to Wang’s declaration of how he “have always been a defender of traditional artistic values”, at here, he once again confirms his belief of artist’s power in “imaging a world” and “the meaning and relationships that his works have with the public”. Huang Zhuan also argued that Wang’s different understanding of art already separates himself with “Political Pop” mark. As he said, “Behind that seemingly radical strategy of representation, the artist is still concerned with the classical question: how art, in different cultures, can still maintain its divine essence” (161). In this sense, even

⁹⁷ Yan Shanchun, *Wang Guangyi Interview*.

with a seemingly postmodernism form, such as juxtaposition of opposite ideological elements, Wang Guangyi nevertheless intended to deconstruct all meanings embedded in these symbols and signs. Instead, no matter his realistic expression of consumerist reality, or his belief in the role of artist, all indicates a modernism goal.

In this section, from analyzing the definition of “Political Pop” to comparing the differences between western and Chinese pop artists, instead of limited by simplistic explanation of Wang Guangyi’s artworks, such as *Mao Zedong: AO* and the *Great Criticism* series, I illustrated its complicated features, such as its continuous realism tradition to reveal the ordinary commercial life and traditional oil painting forms. Moreover, by acknowledging the artist’s self-description of his understanding of Andy Warhol and the role of artist, including his belief of artist’s power in “imaging a world” and “the meaning and relationships that his works have with the public”, I explored Wang’s modernism pursuit in a feature of postmodernism form— “half-Pop”. In order to point out the doubtful label of “Political Pop” to mark the *Great Criticism* series, I also quote Yi Ying’s remark of lack of “visual conditions and experiences of modern society” in China, which can be viewed as a reason for the intertwined relations of modernism and postmodernism in artworks in 1980s and 1990s. Nevertheless, the specific historical experiences of Chinese artists can no longer be neglected. It is not exaggerating to say that Cultural Revolution serves as an important way for Chinese

contemporary artist, such as Wang Guangyi, to retell a personal and national trauma in a creative way.

4.5 Conclusion

In this section, by revisiting Wang Guangyi's *Mao Zedong : AO* and the *Great Criticism* series in a critical perspective, I intended to reflect the complicated relations between modernism and postmodernism in contemporary Chinese art. Zhang Xudong once argued that, "It is only in the context of postmodern nostalgia that we can explain the splashy return of Mao badges and Cultural Revolutionary songs to the streets of Chinese cities"⁹⁸. Different from his argument, I regard the appearance of Mao and other revolutionary figures in Cultural Revolution as a modernism engagement with past memory. Though labelled as "Political Pop" in postmodernism feature, Wang Guangyi's *Mao Zedong: AO* and the *Great Criticism* series nevertheless lose a deep concern shared by modernism paradigm. Therefore, in this section, I approached to Wang Guangyi's artworks by reflecting several possible misreading ways, including the ironic success of *Mao Zedong: AO* due to its surrounded by viewer and critics' "humanistic zeal", the critiquing Wang's artworks as self-Orientalize or market-orientated, and the simplistic misnomer of "Political Pop".

⁹⁸ Dirlik, Arif, Xudong Zhang, and Duke University Press. *Postmodernism & China*. Duke University Press, Durham [N.C.], 2000.

In Section 4.2, by reexamining Wang Guangyi's *Mao Zedong: AO* with his declaration of "clearing out humanistic zeal", I clarified the irony relations between artist's himself intention and viewers' reaction. For example, I quoted artist's own explaining of the intention in using Mao's image with grid in interviews, which contrast to most viewer's reaction and reception towards "*Mao Zedong: AO*". Not only analyzed the "neutral" and "critical" attitudes purposed by Wang, I also traced the trajectory of 1985's New Wave. It is at this point that I argued that we should not neglect Wang's distinguished feature that differentiate him in this art movement. Later, in Section 4.3, from analyzing Wang's *Great Criticism* series in a historical and cultural context, and different trajectory of critics towards Wang Guangyi's *Great Criticism* series, represented by Wang Xiaoming and Geremie. R. Barmé, I demonstrated that the critical attitude of Wang towards the "revolutionary Maoist past" and "commodity fetishism" at present are both embedded in his *Great Criticism* series. In Section 4.4, by criticizing the uses of so-called "Political Pop" to label Wang Guangyi's artworks, I demonstrated the significance of Wang Guangyi's modernism artistic pursuit in retelling history in a certain postmodernism way – "half-pop". For example, from comparing the differences between western and Chinese pop artists, such as Wang Guangyi and Andy Warhol, I argued that the feature of Wang's artworks includes its continuous realism tradition to reveal the ordinary commercial life, opening-up space for potential interpretations, and traditional oil painting forms.

All in all, from this section, what I want to address is the importance of retrieving the cultural phenomenon in post-revolutionary and post-socialist China in late 1980s and 1990s. From revisiting Wang Guangyi's artworks at that time, I hope to reflect the intertwined relations between modernism and postmodernism in Chinese contemporary art. Indeed, the memory of Cultural Revolution can never be oppressed; the experience of past trauma can never be silenced. For Wang, the uses of artworks in a seemingly postmodern form—Pop Art, can serve as an effective way to “imagine a world” and “the meaning and relationships that his works have with the public”. Similar to Wang, there are still a lot of artists, writers or poets, believe the divines of art, rather than falling into an “empty signifier”. As Gao Mingle pointed out, “In China, postmodernity has been just an alternative version of modernity. Postmodernists was perceived as a newer version of modernity proper, instead of as an essential critique of it or a break with it”⁹⁹. Therefore, it is important to bear in mind the distinctiveness of Chinese contemporary art, even postmodernism has been just an alternative version of modernism.

⁹⁹ Gao Minglu, “Post-Utopian Avant-garde Art in China” in Erjavec, Aleš, and Boris Grois, *Postmodernism and the Postsocialist Condition: Politicized Art Under Late Socialism*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 2003.

5. Conclusion

On October 1, 1949, at ten o'clock sharp, Mao Zedong and the other top leaders appeared on the podium overlooking the square. The effect was electric. Mao had been my hero since my brother first told me he was China's messiah, and this was my first glimpse of my savior. Even working in the Fragrant Hills, so close to Mao's residence, I had never seen him before... "The Chinese people have stood up," Mao proclaimed, and the crowd went wild, thundering in applause, shouting over and over, "Long Live the People's Republic of China!" "Long Live the Chinese Communist Party!" I was so full of joy my heart nearly burst out of my throat, and tears welled up in my eyes. I was so proud of China, so full of hope, so happy that the exploitation and suffering, the aggressions from foreigners would be gone forever¹⁰⁰.

—Dr. Li Zhisui

Writing at that famous history moment, Dr. Li Zhusui, who is Mao's physician for twenty-two years, described the thrill of millions of Chinese people when witnessing the founding ceremony of China. Standing at Tiananmen Square, Dong Xiwen was also among these "full of hope" and "happy" people. However, at that time, Dong did not know only three years later, he would have the opportunity to paint this important moment on canvas—*The Founding Ceremony of China*. This painting triumphantly concludes the visual narrative of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) history on canvas. Interestingly, it is also this painting epitomizes the tension between art and politics in the People's Republic of China (PRC). In this famous piece (see Figure 19), Dong portrayed Mao Zedong in Tiananmen Square on October 1, 1949, with his senior associates in attendance—Liu Shaoqi, Zhu De, Zhou Enlai, Gao Gang, Lin Boqu, and others. They are surrounded by huge lanterns, a Chinese symbol of prosperity, and a sea

¹⁰⁰ Li Zhisui and Anne F. Thurston. *The Private Life of Chairman Mao: The Memoirs of Mao's Personal Physician*. 1st ed. New York: Random House, 1994.

of red banners that declare the founding of a new nation. When first unveiled in 1953, the painting was widely hailed as one of the greatest oil paintings ever produced by a Chinese artist. However, Dong was requested later to make two changes during political campaigns, removing two leaders portrayed—Gao Gang and Liu Shaoqi (see Figure 20 and Figure 21).



Figure 19: *The Founding Ceremony of China (Copied)*, 1952, oil on canvas, 230 × 405cm.



Figure 20: *The Founding Ceremony of China (without Gao Gang)*, 1954, oil on canvas, 230 × 405cm.



Figure 21: *The Founding Ceremony of China (without Gao Gang and Liu Shaoqi)*, 1967, oil on canvas, 230 × 405cm.

Initially, due to its highly regarded political and historical importance by the CCP, with its combination of Chinese traditional painting features to western oil painting form, Dong Xiwen's painting, *The Founding Ceremony of China*, turned out to be a huge successful artwork at that time. After it was viewed and applauded by Mao in early 1953, which clearly indicated its patron's satisfaction, it was widely reproduced in September, including on the front page of *People's Daily*, and became an icon of the new Chinese art. As a monumental history painting required by the Museum of Chinese Revolution (MCR), it was also approved to hang at the most central position in this museum. In 1959, it is adapted and published in postage stamp (see Figure 22) as the represent image to celebrate the 10th founding of China. In addition, published in poster form, this painting was functioned as a new *nianhua* (see Figure 23), becoming party-approved decoration for the home. In 1953, this celebrated painting was widely distributed by the government publication houses along with other New Year (*nianhua*) prints. It enjoyed great popularity, selling 560,000 copies in three months in its initial printings¹⁰¹.

¹⁰¹ The publication number quoted from Hung, Chang-Tai. "Oil Paintings and Politics: Weaving a Heroic Tale of the Chinese Communist Revolution." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 49, no. 4 (2007): 783-814.



Figure 22: *The Founding Ceremony of China (without Gao Gang), 1959, Stamp.*



Figure 23: *The Founding Ceremony of China (without Gao Gang), 1954, New Year Print, Nianhua.*

From one news reported at *People's Daily* on February 16th, 1964, titled as "Reviewing Nianhua at Villages in Shanxi Province", the author Su Guang, described

how popularity of Dong's painting in some small villages. When he interviewed many families lived at Yicheng, they said "The painting depicted almost all our beloved Chinese leaders like Nianhua", "Every family wants to buy the painting, *The Founding Ceremony of China*, and hung in their room"¹⁰². Indeed, a photograph in an English-Language propaganda magazine shows a model family listening to their radio in a tidy sitting room. On the wall hangs a large poster of *The Founding Ceremony of China*. However, most Chinese hardly knew that this famous painting actually experienced two changes during later political movements in 1960s.

The ominous fate of *The Founding Ceremony of China* is not seen as one particular case. In fact, Chinese artists were not the first to be ordered by authorities to revise their paintings and hence rewrite history in order to accommodate the political reality, for this was a long tradition among their Soviet counterparts as well. In 1949, for instance, Sergei Gerasimov repainted his famous 1943 oil painting, *The Mother of a Partisan*, to give the heroine a more courageous appearance, in conformity with the theory of socialist realism then in vogue in the country¹⁰³. In China, there were also many Chinese paintings experienced the similar fate as Dong's painting, such as Lin Gang' *Zhao Guilan*

¹⁰² Su Guang 1964. Cong nongcun kan nianhua in Shanxi sheng (Reviewing Nianhua at Villages in Shanxi Province), Renmin Ribao (People's Daily), Feb 16.

¹⁰³ Hung, Chang-Tai. "Oil Paintings and Politics: Weaving a Heroic Tale of the Chinese Communist Revolution." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 49, no. 4 (2007): 783-814.

and Hou Yiming's *Comrade Liu Shaoqi and the Anyuan Coal Miner*¹⁰⁴. For example, after Liu Shaoqi was purged in 1967, Hou's painting at first was required to change its content and delimited Liu's figure, later Hou had to recreate another painting *Chairman Mao and the Anyuan Coal Miner* to emphasize Mao's leading role in revolutionary, rather than Liu. Nevertheless, fewer paintings suffered the fate that befell Dong's painting. Compared to his Soviet peers or Chinese colleagues, Dong's painting was constantly requested to change the portrait of leader, as long as one of these leaders in painting was purged during political struggle.

The original painting in 1953 focused on Mao, who reads his proclamation into two microphones atop Tiananmen. Five doves soar into the sky to his right. Directly to his right, beneath him on the square itself, are ranged honor guards and representative of patriotic organizations holding banners and red flags. As one art historian described, "their orderly ranks recede into the upper right, beyond the prominent new flag of the PRC, toward a vanishing point that is roughly aligned with Qianmen (Front Gate), at the southern end of the square"¹⁰⁵. Especially, as we mentioned before, Mao was put in a central position, while other leaders are put in another side. As Andrews pointed out, "Mao Zedong stands alone in the triangular space created by the intersection of two

¹⁰⁴ For example, after Liu Shaoqi was purged in 1967, Hou's painting at first was required to change its content and delimited Liu's figure, later Hou had to recreate another painting *Chairman Mao and the Anyuan Coal Miner* to emphasize Mao's leading role in revolutionary, rather than Liu.

¹⁰⁵ Dal Lago Francesca. *Between High and Low: Modernism, Continuity, and Moral Mission in Chinese Printmaking Practices, 1930–1945*. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2005.

perspective”¹⁰⁶. There are six vice chairmen of the General People’s Government ranged in a liner directed towards Chairman Mao, which order is decided by their rank. The row proceeds from General Zhu De at left to General Gao Gang at far right. Other notables in the front row are the important figure of Liu Shaoqi; Madame Song Qingling, widow of Sun Zhongshan (Sun Yet-sen); Li Jishen; and the beard Zhang Lan. Zhou Enlai, who served in a tuber of key government posts, including premier and foreign minister, is prominent in the second row. Beside him are Dong Biwu, who headed the Political and Legal Committee of the new government; a man whose face is obscured by Liu Shaoqi; an unidentified bearded man; and Gun Moruo, head of the government’s Culture and Educational Committee. Behind Zhou Enlai stands Lin Boqu.

Initially gained successful recognition from Chairman Mao Zedong, art cadre in CAFA, and the masses around China, *The Founding Ceremony of China* has nevertheless faced challenges which also brought up due to its significance in history. For the patron of this painting, the MCR, or we could say, the leaders of CCP, Dong’s painting was actually regarded as an important political symbol. Portraying Chairman Mao Zedong and six leaders in the founding ceremony, to some extent, this painting refers to each person’s position in this historical event, contributing to the birth of PRC. In this sense, the leaders’ appearance in this painting is connected tightly with the actual leaders’

¹⁰⁶ Andrews Julia Frances and Kuiyi Shen. *The Art of Modern China*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012.

political position in real world. Though, as for the artist, Dong might not have the sensitive as the leaders of CCP, who attached more political and historical referential meanings to this painting. Yet, Dong has to afford the responsibility to change his painting to prove his political loyalty to the Party. Therefore, as long as one of leaders in his painting made “political mistakes” and purged, the leader’s appearance on canvas was not allowed. It soon become understandable that Gao Gang and Liu Shaoqi was removed purposely from this famous painting in 1954 and 1967 separately.

However, the ominous fate of *The Founding Ceremony of China* did not end with Dong’s death in 1973. With the end of Cultural Revolution and the accession of Deng Xiaoping after 1976, the Museum of Chinese Revolution display was reorganized to restore the historical accuracy and to recognize the political rehabilitation of Liu Shaoqi, Deng Xiaoping, and other targets under Cultural Revolution. For the new leaders of CCP, the new patron, the representation of CCP leaders in the founding of PRC has to be reinterpreted and reflected the “correct” political position of leaders in that historical moment. Dong’s painting again became a target.

Due to the fact that *The Founding Ceremony of China* is now lacking Liu Shaoqi and Gao Gang. There is need for Chinese people to see the original version of this painting, which represent all the leaders in the founding ceremony without changes. After adding the two leaders in a copied version, in the end, so-called Dong’s most famous work *The Founding Ceremony of China*, now hangs at the National Museum

(renamed after the Museum of Chinese Revolution) was actually not as accurate as Dong's original work. According to Julia Andrews, this painting "is no longer resemble any of Dong's original versions"¹⁰⁷. For instance, though with the Liu Shaoqi and Lin Boqu have reappeared, "a previous unidentified figure in the back now looks vaguely like the young Deng Xiaoping"¹⁰⁸; "a dark-haired man with glasses occupies Gao Gang's spot"; and "four microphones flank Mao Zedong"¹⁰⁹. Moreover, Yan Geng observed that "the red flags and construction site outside the square are omitted"¹¹⁰. Hardly could be called as the original picture, nevertheless, this painting was now hanging at the National museum. Even so, ironically, the painting remains the most important example of Dong Xiwen's art and is still widely reproduced in China.

In fact, this changed version of Dong's copy indicated how the new leader of the CCP reinterpret this historical event—the birth of PRC, from adding or deleting some hardly noticed details of Dong's original works. Once again, Dong Xiwen's painting was appropriated as a political propaganda to meet the patron's aim. Though, this painting still focused on celebrating the foundation of China lead by the CCP. Yet, the only difference is who was regarded as the important leaders contributing to PRC. Nevertheless, we can hardly ignore the artistic innovation embedded in Dong's artwork,

¹⁰⁷ Andrews Julia Frances and Inc NetLibrary. *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1979*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Geng Yan. *Mao's Images: Artists and China's 1949 Transition*. Wiesbaden: J.B. Metzler, 2018.

and the role of individual voice. Dong's arrangement of the architecture and other adorations of ceremony was also quite different from what we saw from the actual photograph (see Figure 24) took at that time. Apart from political representation requested by the patron, this also indicated Dong's artistic concerns. Liang Sicheng, who afford to designing the architecture of founding ceremony, he pointed out the arrangement of pillar in front of the CCP leaders actually missed one from the view posited by Dong's painting¹¹¹. Though, recognizing how Dong arrange the pillar differently, Liang Sicheng actually applauded Dong's creative artist skills¹¹².



Figure 24: *The Founding Ceremony of China, Photograph, 1949, taken by Hou Bo*

The reason for Dong to remove one pillar from the painting is related to Mao's center position. As Hung analyzed this painting, Dong "eliminated a few pillars in front of Mao", in order to "open up the space before him and forge a direct link between the

¹¹¹ See Ai Zhongxin. *Youhua Kaiguodadian de chenggong yu mengnan (The Oil Painting—The Founding Ceremony of China's success and Unfortunate Fate)*. Meishu Yanjiu (Art Studies), 1979, 1.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

chairman and the adoring crowds assembled in the square”¹¹³. The uses of red lantern above Mao is also quite different from reality. This again emphasized how Dong’s understanding of the instruction to present this historical moment, and his creative artistic skills in romanticize and idealize this important topic—the birth of PRC¹¹⁴.

Though, most scholars tend to regard Dong’s more or less imagined and romanticized presentation of the founding ceremony as a simple political propaganda¹¹⁵. Yet, when put Dong once again in the history context, it might be possible for us to interpret his potential voice by arranging leaders’ position, changing architectures’ appearance, and the idealistic depiction of the troop of the parade. That said, apart from Museum of Chinese Revolution (MCR) or the leaders of CCP’s instruction in painting the founding ceremony, Dong’s depiction also underlies his artistic concern. Instead of simply following the request of the patron, Dong’s painting actually disclose an embedded artistic consideration by presenting this ceremony in a certain perspective and creative way.

¹¹³ In addition, the panoramic view of the square filled with orderly, motionless arrays of citizens and communist troops. On the north side of Chang’ An Avenue, close to the gate, people dressed in blue uniforms hold the national flag and the Party flag as well as banners that read “Celebration the Founding of the People’s Republic of China”. On the south side of Chang’an Avenue, behind the Communist army and music troupe, more people hoist the national flag, the Party flag, and, most conspicuous of all, portraits of Mao Zedong and Zhu De. One scholar has once studied that “to underline Mao’s power, his portrait appears ten times in the square, whereas Zhou’s appears only twice”, see Geng, Yan. *Mao’s Images: Artists and China’s 1949 Transition*. Wiesbaden: J.B. Metzler, 2018.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ For example, there are arguments such as, “By introducing a representation of the masses into this privileged view from the rostrum, Dong Xiwen’s painting illustrates the power relationship between the Communist leaders above the gate and the common people below”. See, Andrews, Julia Frances and Kuiyi Shen 1954. *The Art of Modern China*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012.

Narrating the story about the painting, *The Founding Ceremony of China*, in the conclusion of my thesis, I intend to use its several changes in Mao and post-Mao era to bring up more thoughts. Especially, rather than simply arguing Dong's painting as a propaganda art without artistic value or full of political meanings, similar with the discussion in Section 2 about the double effects of women's posters, I think there are more complicated issues to be further considered when examining the visualization of Chinese history. As Vladimir once wrote, "there is only one and the same scheme here: People engaged in artistic endeavors follow instructions. The only difference is that in Soviet documents this is viewed in a positive light, whereas Western critics see it as something negative"¹¹⁶.

Recognizing the dilemma in the study of socialist China and post-socialist China, especially concerning the relation of art and politics, in this thesis, I choose three different visual art forms-posters, stamps and oil painting-from Mao era to post-Mao era. From the cultural-microhistorical perspectives, the trajectory of this thesis follows the discussion of the visualization history of socialist China and post-socialist China, and the relation between art and politics in Mao and post-Mao era. From discussing the propaganda posters' positive and negative influences to political movements in 1950s and 1960s, further to the complicated roles of stamp collector and how it embedded with

¹¹⁶ Paperny Vladimir. *Architecture in the Age of Stalin: Culture Two*. Trans. John Hill and Roann Barris. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

official and individual discourses in 1960s and 1970s, finally to the mislabeled political pop art of Wang Guangyi's work in 1980s and 1990s, I pictured a possible way to understand the politicalizing art process in modern Chinese history. Furthermore, rather than simply using the visual analysis as main research method, based on the primary archives and secondary resources, I choose artwork, art collector, and artist as three typical cases with different research methodologies. In the end, instead of making a conclusion of how post-socialist China shares the continuity and discontinuity with socialist China, and how art intertwined with politics in Mao and Post-Mao era, I would rather leave the question open to further discussion. More important, I hope this thesis is only a start of my research towards the visualization history of China.

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