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The Image of the New Woman

Propaganda Posters and the Making of the
New Socialist Woman in Maoist China

Supervisor

Ch. Prof. Dayton Joseph Lekner

Assistant supervisor

Ch. Prof. Laura De Giorgi

Graduand

Salvatore Alessandro Rafaraci
Matriculation Number 888621

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Abstract

The following analysis examines the representation of women in Maoist visual propaganda, with particular focus on the campaign surrounding the promulgation of the Marriage Law of 1950. Drawing on the central role of propaganda posters within the communicative apparatus of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the study investigates how female imagery was systematically employed to convey, prescribe, and legitimise the transformation of female subjectivity in service of the socialist political project.

The research is structured in two stages. The first aims to develop a theoretical framework, integrating scholarship on mass psychology, visual political propaganda, and gender history in Maoist China. The second applies this framework to a purposively selected corpus of posters organised into five thematic categories and analysed across four interconnected levels: formal composition, semiotic interpretation, discursive propaganda techniques, and affective mobilisation.

The aim of the study is to address a historiographical gap. While scholarship exists on both Maoist propaganda and the condition of women in revolutionary China, the visual construction of women as revolutionary subjects specific, the intersection between the two fields, remains unexplored.

引言

中国共产党的发展历程中，党广泛运用各种工具与方法，来推进并传播其革命理想。其中，文学、诗歌、音乐与视觉艺术均发挥了至关重要的作用。二十世纪下半叶，中国文盲率仍然很高，这些媒介在触达最广泛的民众方面发挥了尤为重要的作用。这些理想的视觉化主要通过宣传画得以实现。宣传画成本低廉、易于印刷，且极具传播效果。实际上，图像能够影响政治讨论、决策与发展，也可以成为宣传与操纵的主要手段之一 (Egea Medrano, Garrido Rubia, & Rojo Martinez, 2021, pp. 216-217)。

中国共产党采用了各种宣传方法，从群众集会、音乐、电影与戏剧表演，到口头形式，如背诵毛泽东（1893-1976）语录、开展政治学习会，以及张贴宣传画。这些方法包括群众动员运动与树立供效仿的榜样 (Shambaugh, 2007, p. 26-27)，目的在于通过思想改造促使民众服从并确立政权合法性；同时依赖激发恰当的情感 (Liu, 2010, p. 332)。信息需要马上被理解，也要与领导人的形象紧密相连 (Welch, 2021, p. 30)。与此同时，“人民不仅需要理解自己在体制中的地位，还要理解国家对他们的期望” (Farley & Johnson, 2021, p. 10)。

群众

为了理解该宣传体系需要一个预备步骤。需要自问这些信息的目标受众是谁，以及为什么他们被认为是易于塑造的。事实上，只有具备相应的群众历史背景知识，才能真正理解这一宣传体系。二十世纪初关于群众的讨论与国际群众理论的背景密不可分 (Xiao, 2017, p. 28-29)。古斯塔夫·勒庞（1895/2025）与西皮奥·西盖莱（1908/2022）是其中的主要代表。中国共产党吸收了这一知识体系，并从文化视角对其进行了重新诠释。

二十世纪中，中国接受了一个深入的政治重新，群众成为了毛泽东主义话语的核心概念之一。“群众以缺乏自我意识、缺乏理性自我引导能力为特征。群众本质上天生顺从，且需要一位领导人” (Xiao, 2017, p. 53) 。因此，“理性论据不同的方法更有效的有影响。只有适当的群众心觉的认识，会得到很多成功” (Xiao, 2017, p. 26) 。

感情与群众

故意动员感情为政治手段进一步强化该逻辑，造成了有针对性的情绪反应，目的是控制群众可预见的群众作为。根据 Liu (2010) ，毛泽东主义话语的目的是”通过改造思想促使民众顺从，并建立自身的合法性，而这一切取决于激发恰当的情感” (Liu, 2010, p. 332) ；同时也系统地运用某些情感，如受害化、道德动员等 (Liu, 2010, pp. 334-336) 。中国共产党宣传系统的作为意识形态管理机构而运作，既在党内发挥作用，也作用于外部社会 (Farley & Johnson, 2021, p. 2) 。它不仅传递信息，更试图塑造民众的意识 ((Evans H. , 2021, p. 149))。在此背景下，群众被视为可塑造的对象，宣传被视为一种治理工具。因此，使用图像作为传递政治信息的主要手段，具有完整的意义。

宣传画

毛泽东政府使用的手段中，宣传画是该研究的主要分析对象。根据 Landsberger (2020) 的研究，宣传画并非一个中国共产党传播的次要手段，而是一个经过系统性发展的政治表达形式。此外，宣传画从革命时期到社会主义建设时期不断改变。”视觉宣传是毛泽东时代中国的教育工具之一，它经常并且成效地转变了或者加强了中国民众的信仰体系与观念体系。视觉宣传将自己的信息深深植入人们的意识与潜意识之中” (Reed, 2021, p. 205) 。宣传画是一种向群众传递政治信息的独特的视觉手段；其设计与作

用旨在使尽可能多的民众能够理解其信息 (Fideliuss, 1998, p. 6) 。此外，宣传画的创造成本低、易于生产，因而得以广泛传播。宣传画到处都能见到，遍布民众生活与工作的各个场所，其鲜艳的色彩吸引了行人的注意。宣传画渗入社会各阶层，在办公室、工厂、学校、民居与宿舍都能见到。那么，宣传画描绘了哪些内容？政府将哪类主题置于视觉图像的核心？其中，女性形象以其特殊的力量与丰富意涵脱颖而出。

革命妇女

为了理解宣传画描绘的变化与毛泽东主义打算瓦解的体制，必须将革命前时期中国妇女的处境加以阐明。根据 Engel (1984)，“在中国，社会主义革命的成功取决于中国家庭的革命性变化 “ (Engel, 1984, p. 960) 。家庭是家长体制最强的因素，也是解放斗争的战场。家庭的作用是“儿童社会主义教育的学校，也是社会主义伦理的细胞 “ (Kristeva & Conroy Kennedy, 1975) 。因此，改变家庭等于改变社会。

中华人民共和国婚姻法

中华人民共和国创立一年后，中华人民共和国婚姻法发布了。该法律引入了基本的家庭关系变化 (Engel, 1984, p. 960) 。根据 1950 年的中华人民共和国婚姻法，”废除封建主义婚姻制度, 实行新民主主义婚姻制度 “ (Engel, 1984, p. 955) 。目的是“实现根本性的变化、改革家庭、推翻过去的体制、且建立一种以新法律与新伦理为基础的关系 “ (Engel, 1984, p. 955) 。该法律禁止包办婚姻、拐卖儿童与杀婴。女性与男性的离婚权利完全相同 (Samarani, 2017, pp. 274-275) 。政府鼓励了妇女从事传统上为男性保留的职位，并为她们提供了受教育的机会。女性解放的基础在于“她们参与劳动” (Cheung, 2007, p. 42) 。

研究的结构

该研究旨在对上述主题进行分析，研究方法涵盖历史政治背景分析、宣传理论与图像分析。该分析的逻辑从群众延伸至宣传，从宣传延伸至性别问题，再从性别问题延伸主女性作为革命主体的呈现。该研究第一部分旨在分析历史背景与理论框架，具体涵盖毛泽东主义国家的建立、中国群众的理论化与概念化、宣传的政治作用以及群众动员手段的功能，并最终考察毛泽东时代图像生产背后的政治逻辑。第二部分旨在着重考察革命时代前中国女性的情况，着重考察中华人民共和国初期政权所推行的规范性、社会性与象征性变化；重点将聚焦于婚姻法运动（1950 年至 1955 年）。最后，该研究旨在将宣传画作为历史史料与图像志文本加以分析，将探讨性别重构如何在宣传画中得以呈现、编码及设计。研究宣传画中的女性形象，就是探讨党如何通过视觉手段塑造其所欲治理的主体；同时，也是尝试理解党要求女性如何看待这些图像，并在其中认出自己，或认出自己应当成为的女性。

研究结果预览

本研究的分析显示，宣传画中的女性形象往往被置于历史上非传统的场域之中，呈现出积极投身公共生活的新女性形象。与此相伴的，是一种以正面情感为主导的基调，以及令观者倍感熟悉与亲近的视觉环境，而党的元素则作为反复出现的构成部分贯穿其间。这些发现将在后续章节中作进一步探讨，并由此引出对毛泽东主义视觉宣传中女性解放与集体纪律之间关系的思考。

Introduction

Throughout the development of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), a wide range of tools and methods were employed to promote and disseminate its revolutionary ideals. Among these, literature, poetry, music and graphic art played a crucial role in this effort. These media were particularly effective in reaching the broadest possible segment of the Chinese population during the second half of the twentieth century, an era still marked by high rates of illiteracy. The visualisation of the ideals to be disseminated materialized primarily through propaganda posters: inexpensive and easy to produce, yet extraordinarily effective. Images, in fact, can influence political discussions, decisions, and developments and, easily becoming a means of propaganda and manipulation (Egea Medrano, Garrido Rubia, & Rojo Martinez, 2021, pp. 216-217).

The Party used a wide range of propaganda techniques, from mass rallies, music, film, and theatre as well as oral instruments such as the memorisation of Mao Zedong's (1893-1976) quotations and political study sessions, and posters. These included mass mobilisation campaigns and the construction of models to be emulated (Shambaugh, 2007, p. 26-27), with the aim of inducing conformity and establishing legitimacy through the transformation of minds, which depended on bringing out appropriate emotions (Liu, 2010, p. 332). The aim was to communicate messages that were immediately comprehensible and closely identified with the figure of the Leader (Welch, 2021, p. 30), while ensuring that "the population was aware not only of its place within the system, but also of the expectations the state had of them" (Farley & Johnson, 2021, p. 10).

***Qunzhong* as Key Audience and Subject**

Understanding this propaganda machine requires, however, a preliminary step. It is crucial interrogating on whom the recipients of these messages were, and why they were

considered particularly susceptible to being shaped. The theme of propaganda cannot, in fact, be fully understood without an adequate and historically contextualised knowledge of the concept of *qunzhong* 群众 (masses). The emergence of the discourse centred on the concept of *qunzhong* in early twentieth-century China cannot be separated from the transnational circulation of crowd theories (Xiao, 2017, p. 28-29) such as those of Le Bon (1895/2025) and Sighele (1908/2022), who represent prominent examples. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) absorbed this body of knowledge and reinterpreted it through a revolutionary lens. China underwent a profound political reloading over the course of the twentieth century, becoming a pillar concept of Maoist revolutionary language. “Characterised by a lack of self-awareness and by no rational ability to direct itself, *qunzhong* is essentially prone to obey and constitutionally ‘calls for a leader’” (Xiao, 2017, p. 53). Therefore, it can be influenced far more effectively through means other than rational argument. If the knowledge of the crowd-mind is used in the right way, great success can be achieved” (Xiao, 2017, p. 26).

Emotion and the Masses

This logic was further amplified by the deliberate mobilisation of emotion as a political instrument, targeting specific affective responses in order to provoke and control predictable behavioural outcomes in the masses. Liu (2010) has shown how Maoist discourse aimed to “induce conformity and establishing its legitimacy through the transformation of minds, which depended on eliciting appropriate emotions” (Liu, 2010, p. 332) systematically deploying emotions, such as victimization, moralization etc. (Liu, 2010, pp. 334-336). The propaganda apparatus of the CCP thus functioned as an institution for the management of ideology both within the Party and in the society external to it (Farley & Johnson, 2021, p. 2). It did not merely inform, but actively sought to shape consciousness (Evans H. , 2021, p. 149). It is within this framework, where the masses are conceived as malleable matter, and propaganda as an

instrument of governance, that the systematic recourse to images as a vehicle of political messaging acquires its full significance.

Posters as Key Medium of Propaganda

Among all the propagandistic tools employed by the Maoist regime, visual posters constitute the privileged object of analysis for this research. As Landsberger (2020) has extensively documented, propaganda posters were not a marginal element of the CCP's communication strategy, but rather one of its most systematically developed and politically calculated expressions, evolving continuously from the revolutionary period through the years of socialist construction. "Visual propaganda was a particularly potent component of Maoist China's indoctrination efforts. Frequently, and successfully, it modified, transformed or simply reinforced the belief system and modes of behaviour of China's citizenry by imprinting its message onto both their conscious and subconscious minds" (Reed, 2021, p. 205). Posters were used as a major vehicle for transferring political messages to the masses. They represented an exceptional visual form, insofar as their function and design were oriented towards immediate comprehensibility for the widest possible portion of the population (Fidelius, 1998, p. 6). Moreover, they could be produced cheaply and easily, rendering them widely accessible. They were visible everywhere, surrounding every place where people lived and worked and their vivid colours immediately captured the attention of passers-by. Posters penetrated even the lowest levels of the social hierarchy, appearing in offices, factories, and schools, but also in private homes and dormitories. Yet what was represented in these posters? Which subjects did the regime choose to place at the centre of its political iconography? Among these, one emerges with particular force and richness of meaning: the figure of women.

Women as Revolutionary Subjects

To fully understand the scope of the transformation represented in the posters, and the system Maoism intended to dismantle, it is necessary to situate the condition of Chinese women in the period preceding the revolution. As underlined by Engel (1984): “the success of the socialist revolution in China depends upon revolutionary change in the Chinese family” (Engel, 1984, p. 960). The family was the most resistant node of the traditional patriarchal order and the terrain upon which the decisive battle for emancipation would be fought. The family functioned “as a school and a cell for the socialist education of children and the propagation of socialist ethics” (Kristeva & Conroy Kennedy, 1975). To transform the family was, in the last analysis, to transform society itself.

Marriage Law

Within a year of the founding of the People’s Republic of China, *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo hunyin fa* 中华人民共和国婚姻法 (The Marriage Law of People’s Republic of China) was promulgated introducing fundamental changes in family relations (Engel, 1984, p. 960). According to China’s 1950 Marriage law, “the feudal marriage system shall be abolished. The new democratic marriage system shall be put into effect” (Engel, 1984, p. 955), with the explicit aim of causing “fundamental changes, aimed at family revolution by destroying all former patterns and building new relationships on the basis of new law and new ethics” (Engel, 1984, p. 955). Arranged marriages, child-trafficking, and infanticide were prohibited by law; women and men were considered equal in applying for divorce (Samarani, 2017, pp. 274-275). The government encouraged women to pursue professions traditionally reserved for men and offered them access to education (Tao, 1996, p. 351), grounding its discourse on female emancipation in the principle that “the prerequisite of women’s liberation lies in their participation in labour” (Cheung, 2007, p. 42).

Structure of the Work

The present work intends to analyse these themes through an approach that interweaves political history, propaganda theory, and image analysis, following the logical thread that leads from the masses to propaganda, from propaganda to posters, and from posters to the representation of woman as revolutionary subject. In the first part, the historical context and theoretical framework will be examined. The analysis will examine the construction of the Maoist socialist state, the way in which the notion of masses has been theorized and conceptualized, the role of propaganda as a tool instrument of governance and mass mobilization, and the political logic underlying the production of images under the Maoist regime. In the second part, the analysis will focus on the condition of women in pre-revolutionary China and on the normative, social and symbolic transformations introduced by the regime in the early period of the People's Republic, with a specific focus on the context surrounding the Marriage Law campaign (1950-55). Lastly, the work will concentrate on the analysis of visual propaganda posters as historical sources and iconographic texts, exploring how the mobilisation of women and the reconfiguration of gender are represented, encoded, and projected within this specific medium. To study how women were represented in the posters is, in the last analysis, to interrogate how power constructs the subjects it intends to govern and how women were asked to look at these images and find themselves there or find who they were supposed to become.

Preview of Findings

The analysis conducted suggests that women are predominantly represented in historically non-conventional contexts, portraying the image of a female figure actively engaged in the public sphere. This representation is accompanied by a predominantly positive emotional register and a visual environment rendered familiar and close to the observer, within which the presence of the Party emerges as a recurring element. These findings, discussed in greater depth

in the following chapters, open onto a reflection on the relationship between female emancipation and collective discipline in Maoist visual propaganda.

Methods

Research Design

The present study adopts a two-stage framework that integrates a qualitative theoretical analysis with a subsequent visual-iconographic application. The stages are presented sequentially for clarity; however, they must be conceived as mutually interrelated. The theoretical groundwork developed in the first stage establishes the analytical criteria used in the second, while the visual analysis in turn substantiates and refines the theoretical propositions advanced throughout the research. Taken together, the two stages aim is to produce a systematic yet contextually sensitive account of the role of propaganda posters in the construction and spread of gender norms within Maoist China, with particular reference to the campaign surrounding the promulgation of the Marriage Law of 1950.

Sources and Corpus

The research draws on three categories of sources, selected to ensure empirical grounding and interpretive breadth. Primary sources consist of the complete texts of Mao Zedong's speeches transcriptions and selected writings in their original language, as well as the full legislative text of the Marriage Law of 1950, materials that constitute the foundational documentary evidence from which the ideological and normative framework of the analysis is derived. The English edition *The Marriage Law of People's Republic of China* published by the Foreign Language Press (1950) was the main source for the Marriage Law quotations. The text in the original language of the law was also consulted for terminological clarification and comparison with the English translation. Secondary sources include scholarly literature engaging with the subjects under investigation, i.e., studies on mass mobilisation, studies on propaganda with particular focus on Maoist times, gender history in Maoist and modern China, visual propaganda in political

contexts, image analysis, semiotics and iconography. Where relevant, sources concerning the social condition of artists operating under Maoist cultural framework have also been consulted, in order to contextualise the production conditions of the visual material under examination. Finally, the visual primary sources consist of a purposively selected corpus of 51 Chinese propaganda posters, drawn from the digital archive at chinese posters.net and from Landsberger's (2020) work *Chinese Propaganda Posters* (see Appendix 1). The posters were selected primarily among those dated within the period of the Marriage Law campaign (c. 1950-1955), on the basis of their thematic relevance to the research; posters directly referencing the legislative reform have been prioritised. Visual material from the broader Maoist period that engages with the themes under investigation have also been included where analytically relevant.

Inductive Theoretical Framework

The first stage of the analysis proceeds from the general to the specific, following an inductive logic that begins with an inquiry into the foundational conceptual categories that are structurally inseparable from the research topic, namely the theorisation of the masses and the mechanisms of mass mobilisation, before progressing to a focused examination of Maoist propaganda. The secondary literature has been systematically organised into three macro-categories identified as analytically essential to the progression of the research: Psychological and social-psychological works, studies on propaganda posters, and historical scholarship on Maoist China.

Literature Organization

The first category encompasses psychological and social-psychological works addressing mass behaviour and unconscious processes, drawn from both Western theoretical traditions and, above all, scholarship produced within the Chinese context. These two bodies of literature have been examined in an integrated manner so as to delineate an analytical perspective that is as

objective as possible while remaining sensitive to the specific socio-political dynamics and cultural peculiarities of Maoist China. The second category includes studies on propaganda posters in political contexts, almost exclusively in the Chinese case, as well as theoretical literature on image analysis, iconography, the instrumental use of visual propaganda, and the mechanisms of image perception. It further includes works on the social condition of artists within the Maoist cultural apparatus, which are considered necessary for understanding the constraints and imperatives under which the visual material was produced. The third category consists of historical scholarship on Maoist China, contextualised to illuminate dominant ideological currents, gender studies on the condition of women in both the pre- and post-revolutionary periods, and the gender dynamics of the reform era. Legislative material has been supplemented to this category, specifically the Marriage Law of 1950, as well as relevant Party directives. All bibliographic material has been catalogued in a structured Excel file, classified according to the following thematic headings: *Propaganda as a political tool*, *Posters*, *Semiotics*, *Women and Marriage Law*. Each source has been assigned some keywords to facilitate the subsequent process of information retrieval and referencing.

Visual Corpus Classification

The second stage applies this framework to a corpus of 51 posters assembled from the aforementioned sources. In a preliminary organisational phase, the corpus was classified into five thematic categories, informed by the values promoted by the government and the objectives advanced by the Marriage Law: Marriage (A), Exemplary Women (B), Women as Caregivers (C), Women in Labour and Production (D) and Gender and Generational Transmission (E). Each category has been assigned an alphabetical identifier, and each individual poster within a category has been assigned a progressive numerical code (e.g., A-1, A-2, B-1, etc.) so as to streamline analytical referencing throughout the study.

Compositional Structure

Each poster has been subjected to a structured analytical procedure organised across four interconnected levels of inquiry. The first level, drawing on the analytical wireframe proposed by Schneider (2025), involves the formal dissection of the poster's compositional elements. All visual components are inventoried using standardised shorthand notation and ranked according to their degree of visual prominence. Typefaces and textual hierarchies are noted, with particular attention to bold elements and any non-Chinese script; colours are catalogued and interpreted with reference to their established symbolic valences within Chinese cultural context, notably: *Red*, joy and good fortune; *White*, death and mourning; *Blue*, wisdom; *Green*, growth and harmony (Bhardwaj, 2020, p. 11). The spatial and semantic relationships between textual and visual elements are identified so as to establish which elements are likely to function in mutual reinforcement. The compositional structure analysis is further informed by the social semiotic framework developed by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006). The analytical approach is selectively applied to two specific dimensions of the visual material. First, the interactive dimension, which analyses whether depicted figures establish direct eye contact with the viewer, alongside the analysis of vertical angle as a constructor of power relations between represented figures and the implied power. Secondly, will be analysed the representational dimension, i.e., the identification of vectors produced by gesture and body orientation, which allow for a deeper account of the action processes encoded in the corporal language of the figures (Van Leeuwen & Kess, 2006, p. 16). For analytical purposes, the concepts of “offer” and “demand” are considered important. “Offer” refers to cases in which the depicted participant does not directly look at the viewer, but instead directs an indirect gaze. The viewer is not the object of the gaze, but rather a detached observer. The depicted participant is therefore presented to the viewer as an object of contemplation (Van Leeuwen & Kess, 2006, pp. 118-119). “Demand”, on the other hand, occurs

when the depicted participant looks directly at the viewer. In this case, eye contact is established, and the gaze is used to request or convey something to the viewer, inviting them into an imagined relationship with the subject (Van Leeuwen & Kess, 2006, p. 117).

Semantic and Semiotic Interpretation

The second level moves from formal description to semantic interpretation, establishing the connections between the poster's compositional elements and the political and cultural discourses they inscribe. The relationship between caption and visual content is examined through the concept of *anchoring* (Schneider, 2025, p. 179) i.e., the textual fixing of the image's polysemic potential, in order to determine how verbal elements constrain and orient the ideological reading of the visual. Graphic elements are further interpreted through a semiotic triangle approach, with particular attention to the distinction between *index*, and *symbol*. As defined by Wasserstrom (2011), an index is a sign that stands for something else by virtue of being a symptom or outcome of that thing, while a symbol stands for something purely on the basis of social convention (Wasserstrom, 2011, p. 10). The hierarchical positioning of figures within the composition is considered, taken to signal relative importance and authority within the scene (Schneider, 2025, p. 185); special attention is paid to the visual representation of political authority and, where present, to the figure of Mao Zedong, treated as a significant indicator of ideological positioning.

Classification of Contexts of Female Representation

In the course of the corpus analysis, attention was also devoted to the quantitative dimension of female representation, with the aim of examining the extent to which the visual model promoted by the CCP departed from the traditional female figure. This classification was deemed functional to the purposes of the analysis, as it proved necessary to understand the way in which women were represented. From here, it becomes possible to deduce which contexts

were perceived as appropriate or suitable for the female gender, and to identify which contexts Maoist visual propaganda sought to promote. To this end, each poster was classified into one of the following three categories: *non-conventional*, where the woman is represented in contexts or roles historically associated with male participation in the public sphere, such as factories, shipyards, or the military; *conventional*, where the woman is placed in contexts attributable to the traditional female role, such as domestic care, motherhood, or childcare; and *neutral*, where the female figure is inserted in generic spaces or non-specific backgrounds, devoid of a role connotation clearly attributable to either pole.

Classification of Named and Anonymous Figures

For the purposes of the present analysis, the female figures in the corpus were classified into three categories whether they are explicitly identifiable on the basis that the presence or absence of a nominal reference reflects a distinct propagandistic function. The “named” category comprises posters in which an explicit and direct reference to the figure depicted is present through a name appearing in the caption or in the textual elements of the poster. The “anonymous” category comprises posters in which such a reference is absent, or in which the figure is not identifiable. The “undefined” category comprises posters in which no explicit reference to the figure is present, but the figure nonetheless remains easily recognisable through iconographic means.

Discursive Propaganda Techniques

At the third level, each poster is analysed through the lens of Liu’s (2010) three techniques of discourse propagation, which illuminate the rhetorical mechanisms by which political discourse is translated into visual terms. *Personalisation*, that concerns the way in which the poster translates abstract discourse into individual narratives and personal stories; *magnification* is related to the politicisation of everyday life, the rendering of the private domain legible in

terms of collectiveness; *moralisation-mythmaking*, which examines the presence of class enemies or morally superior individuals and the ethical hierarchies the poster seeks to establish.

Affective Mobilization

The final level addresses the poster's affective register and its intended emotional mobilisation. This was established by first identifying the principal emotions conveyed within each poster, inferred through facial expressions, colour choices, and related visual elements, and subsequently deducing the communicative intent underlying the image. On this basis, building on Wang (2010) and Tao (1996), four primary affective mobilization modalities are considered. *Victimisation*, whereby the construction of victims or villains generates anger and indignation as preconditions for political action; *redemption*, whereby the evocation of moral failings provokes guilt and the impulse of self-correction; *emancipation*, whereby the projection of an idealised future mobilises willpower and euphoria; and *participation*, whereby the poster articulates the relationship between revolutionary engagement and liberation positioning political involvement as both the means and the expression of emancipation. Additionally, each poster is assessed with respect to the three core propaganda themes identified by Farley (2021, p. 63): *nationalism*, *social reform*, and the development of socialism through *idealised citizens*, which provide a further axis of comparative interpretation.

Grid Development

The levels of analysis described above have been synthesised into an analytical grid (see Appendix 2), applied iteratively to each poster in the corpus with the aim of producing a more panoramic analytical reading of the visual material. Several initial descriptive fields provide a synthetic narrative gloss on each poster, situated prior to the analytical categories proper, namely “What is this poster representing?”, “What is the scope of this poster?” and “What is it aiming to do?”. These fields register a first, pre-analytical impression of each poster, recording what it

appears to depict at first glance, what impression it seems designed to elicit in the viewer, and what purpose it appears to have been produced for. The formal and compositional level corresponds within the grid to the entries “Elements”, “Colours”, and “Textual elements”. The semantic and semiotic level is reflected in the “Anchoring”, “Levels of hierarchy” and “Graphic elements (Index and Symbols)” columns, together with the columns tracing Mao’s presence, namely “Location of Mao’s representation”, “Accompanying figures”, and “Figures depicted in proximity to Mao”. The discursive propaganda techniques and the affective mobilisation levels are recorded under the entries “What is this poster trying to provoke?” and “Emotions represented”.

Use of Artificial Intelligence

In accordance with the Ca’ Foscari University of Venice’s guidelines on the transparent declaration of Artificial Intelligence tools in academic work, the author hereby discloses that two AI-based generative tools were employed during the preparation of this thesis. The tools in question are ChatGPT (OpenAI) and Claude (Anthropic). These tools were used in two specific phases of the research process. First, they were consulted as a bibliographic aid, helping to find specific sources on defined topics where the existing literature was difficult to navigate. In all cases, the sources thus identified were subsequently read and evaluated independently by the author, and their inclusion in the thesis reflects the author’s own judgement rather than the output of the tool itself. Second, these tools were employed as linguistic aids in the revision of written texts, with particular reference to English and Chinese, neither of which is the author’s first language. The aim was that of improving the clarity, grammatical correctness, and coherence. The content of the argument, the selection and interpretation of sources, the analytical framework, and the conclusions drawn remain entirely the product of the author’s independent scholarly work. All suggestions and textual reformulations generated by these tools were critically reviewed and

either modified, or discarded on the basis of the author's own judgement. The use of AI tools did not extend to the development of the argumentation, the interpretation of visual or historical sources, or the production of any content presented as original scholarly contribution.

Chapter 1: The Concept of Masses and Propaganda

As a Mass Mobilization Political Tool

1.1. Masses in the Chinese conception

In this section, we will take a close look at the concept of *masses*, a notion that has different connotations based on the cultural lens through which we look at it. The discussion begins with the concept of public, which provides the necessary foundation to shift to the concept of *qunzhong* 群众 (mass, crowd). Different perspectives derived from both Western and Chinese approaches will be confronted, highlighting how general theories and studies on masses have been understood and re-interpreted in the Chinese intellectual framework. Finally, this study aims to understand and provide the necessary conceptual categories to understand propaganda and mass mobilization.

The Concept of Public

Before turning to the specificities of masses, it is useful to briefly clarify the notion of *public*, as it provides a conceptual framework for better understanding how collective subjects are formed and addressed. The term *public* is a fluid concept. It ranges from people physically assembled in the same place to individuals who, though physically distant, are connected by shared ideas and sentiments, forming a *mental cohesion* (Sighele, *L'intelligenza della folla*, 1908/2022, pp. 48-49). This distinction suggests a shift from forms of association based on proximity to forms grounded in intellectual connection, which characterises modern societies (Sighele, *L'intelligenza della folla*, 1908/2022, pp. 53-54). Therefore, the *public* can be understood as a collective entity that exists beyond immediate physical interaction, operating at a level of shared meanings and representations. It is within this context that propaganda becomes analytically relevant. If the public is constituted through shared ideas rather than physical

relations, propaganda thus becomes one of the key mechanisms through which such shared meanings are produced and disseminated.

What is *Qunzhong*

However, this general conceptualization remains insufficient for understanding how such progress operates in political contexts. In order to grasp how propaganda functions in the Chinese context, it is necessary to move from the general and abstract notion of public, to the more historically and politically pertinent concept of *Qunzhong* 群众 (mass, crowd). *Qunzhong* can be traced in ancient Chinese works. A comprehensive research of the word *qunzhong* in the electronic edition of the *Siku quanshu* 四库全书 (four treasuries) has been conducted by Li (2018). This already speaks to the deep historical roots of the concept within the Chinese textual tradition. Across the occurrences, the term tends to cluster around four distinct meanings (Li, 2018, p. 136-137).

The Usages of *Qunzhong* in *Siku Quanshu*

In its most neutral usage, it can refer to ordinary folks or average people, as illustrated by descriptions such as this, derived from the *Wei shu* 魏书 (Book of Wei), vol. 69:

身長九尺，腰帶十圍，于群众之中魁然有异。

He is nine chi tall, his is was ten wei. He stands out strikingly among the masses (Li, 2013, p. 34, author's translation).

A second usage foregrounds the hierarchical relationship between the ruler and the ruled. In this case, the emphasis on their condition as subjects under someone else's authority. The statement from *Zhouyi kouyi* 周易口义 (Commentary on the Book of changes), vol. 2 which follows exemplifies this concept:

行师之道，役其群众，在于事始，未必尽从。

In the conduct of military operations, the ruler uses the masses. It depends, on the initial stage of the undertaking and does not [necessarily] require universal compliance (Li, 2013, p. 34, author's translation).

In other contexts, the term acquires a more critical nuance, referring to groups portrayed as susceptible to manipulation or deception. The following passage derived from *Sanguozhi Wei zhi* 三国志魏志 (Records of the Three Kingdoms, Wei Annals), vol. 4 states:

伪大将军费祎驱率群众，阴图鬬鬪。

The masses are ignorant, easily misled and manipulable (Li, 2013, p. 35, author's translation).

Finally, the term may also carry a clear pejorative meaning when used to denote illegally assembled groups of rebels, or destructive crowds, as described in *Xu zizhi tongjian changbian* 续资治通鉴长编 (Extended chronicles of the *Zizhi Tongjian*), vol. 263:

河东近多劫贼，动成群众，可专令经略察访。

Recently, there have been many bandits in Hedong. They easily gather into mobs (Li, 2013, p. 35, author's translation).

These usages reveal that *qunzhong* never carried a single meaning, even in its earliest attestations. The term already oscillated between different and sometimes contradictory registers. The masses are conceived as an undifferentiated social backdrop, as presented in the *Wei shu*, prone to be subject under command, whose compliance cannot be assumed, as framed by the *Zhouyi kouyi*. Moreover, they are susceptible to manipulation, reduced to a potentially dangerous

mob. All four usages position the masses as objects of authority, suspicion or control, and only very rarely as autonomous political actors. This ambivalence never resolved as the concept moved into the modern era. Rather it was sharpened and charged with new political meanings. It is precisely this ambivalence that would come to shape how *qunzhong* was later taken up and transformed within the Chinese revolutionary tradition.

Plebs and Demos

Unlike *qunzhong*, which had an identifiable term and a traceable history in the Chinese classical tradition, the ancient Western world did not produce a direct equivalent for the modern concept of mass or crowd as a distinct social and political category (Cammack, 2019, p. 42). A partial parallel could be found in the ancient Roman and Greek concepts of *plebs* and *demos*. In ancient Rome the plebs designated the hereditary class of commoners (Unknown, Plebs, 2003), those excluded from political power by the patrician elite (Wasson & L., 2022). In ancient Greece, *demos* referred similarly to the common people, the inhabitants of the countryside and villages as distinct from the ruling classes of the city-state; the term “comprised rich and poor, leaders and followers, mass and elite alike”. In both cases, the term resists a straightforward equivalence with *qunzhong*. It was a more inclusive and less consistently hierarchical concept. It would therefore be mistaken to draw too close an equivalence between these classical terms and the dynastic Chinese usage. The more telling parallel lies in the modern Western rediscovery of the masses as a new and distinctly unsettling social phenomenon. During the nineteenth century the field of crowd or collective psychology flourished with the appearance of a growing number of scholars who began to approach the masses as a subject worthy of investigation (Xiao, 2017, p. 28-29). The concept did not simply inherit the classical suspicion of the common people, it was reframed in response to a new historical reality derived from growing urbanisation and industrialisation, producing a new social concept of the masses (Welch, 2021, p. 24).

Western and Chinese Perspective on Masses

Early studies on the masses conceptualize them as unconscious and impulsive organism that acted on instinct rather than reason, closer to the savage and the brute than to the civilised individual (Sighele, 1908/2022, p. 28). The opinion of the masses scarcely counted, and most frequently, did not count at all (Le Bon, Introduction: The Era of Crowds, 1985/2025, p. 10). Masses were, in short, objects of anxiety, a force to be contained rather than a subject to be heard. This new perception is not as distant from the dynastic Chinese one as it might first appear. As the classical usages of *qunzhong* examined above suggest, the pre-revolutionary Chinese tradition similarly positioned the masses as object of danger, never as autonomous political actors. Both traditions share a fundamentally suspicious and hierarchical view of the collective. The decisive difference between the two conceptions lies elsewhere. While the Western tradition largely remained anchored to this vision, the Chinese revolutionary context rearticulated the concept of the masses within a different ideological framework. The masses were no longer a problem to be managed but a driving force of historical progress, the very subject of the revolution. Rather than simply empowering the masses, the Maoist framework elevates and disciplines them, positioning them as both a driving force and an object of political guidance. In this reconfiguration, in the Maoist political setting and discourse the term *qunzhong* carries an altogether different weight and set of meanings.

Aim of the Comparison

It is important to notice from the outset that neither the Western nor the Chinese conceptualization of the masses should be regarded as more correct than the other. The Maoist reconceptualization of the masses should not be understood as an improvement over earlier Western or dynastic perspectives. Rather, each reflects distinct historical, cultural and political traditions that have shaped the term's meaning and its usage. An adequate scholarly engagement

with the notion of the *masses* in the Chinese context cannot afford to confine itself to the Western theoretical tradition. It is only by approaching the concept on its own terms, rather than through the lens of external frameworks, and far from cultural-derived prejudices, that we can begin to understand what it truly means in the context we are about to examine. To that end, the analysis that follows offers a careful comparative examination of both approaches with the aim of arriving at a more complete and contextually grounded understanding of the concept as it operates within the Chinese political framework.

Western Theorists' Approach

As previously said, the foundations of Western mass psychology reside in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by a cluster of influential theorists. Le Bon (1895/2025), whose works remain perhaps the most emblematic expression of this tradition, argued that the masses instinctively follow a leader, and that the most effective tools for mobilising them are not reason or argument, but categorical statements, repetition, and contagion. His contemporary, the French sociologist Gabriel Tarde (as cited in Li, 2018, p. 138), approached the question from a different angle. For Tarde, mass behaviour follows a set of predictable laws. Fashions and rumours spread through a snowball effect of progression, the lower classes tend to emulate the upper, and a preference for indigenous culture consistently prevails over foreign influence. The frame is completed by Freud (1949), who brought a psychoanalytic dimension to the debate. Drawing on concepts such as “desire”, “libido” and “instinct”, he explains the hold that the collective exerts over the individual. These thinkers, despite their different disciplinary backgrounds, are united by shared underlying assumptions, that the individual, once absorbed into the mass, undergoes a kind of regression, losing the rational autonomy that defines the very possibility of political subjecthood. These connotations are far from neutral. They reflect the

ideological preoccupations derived from the historical moment in which these elitist thinkers lived, i.e., the rises of the mass politics (Welch, 2021, p. 24).

Masses as an Impulsive Organism

Sighele (1908/2022) describes the crowd as follows: “The crowd is an unconscious and impulsive organism. It fatally acts more according to the instincts of the savage and the brute than to those of the civilized man” (Sighele, 1908/2022, p. 28, author’s translation). This is a decidedly elitist and pessimistic approach, assuming that the crowd loses its rationality almost entirely, distancing itself from civilization and reducing the individuals within it to merely brutes. It is also a reductionist vision of the topic, that emphasises collective irrationality while systematically underestimating its emergent capacities. This framework leaves no space for the kind of active mobilisation that characterises the Maoist approach to the masses. If the crowd is by definition irrational, propaganda can only ever be manipulation, never emancipation.

Individuals as Microbes

Le Bon’s approach to the concept of the masses, closely aligned with Sighele’s, assumes that the ideas of the crowd are inherently irrational and automatic. This is well encapsulated in the following passage: “Ideas, sentiments, emotions, and beliefs possess in crowds a contagious power as intense as that of microbes” (Le Bon, 1895/2025, p. 96). This contagionist, i.e., which believes that ideas or behaviours spread among individuals like a contagious disease, and reductionist vision of the masses reduces complex social phenomena to quasi-biological and implicitly irrational dynamics, conveying that ideas are transmitted almost automatically, rather than being interpreted or re-elaborated.

1.1b. Marxist-Maoist Contribution

Masses as Social Force

A different interpretation emerges when one turns to the Marxist-Maoist intellectual and political tradition, where the concept of the masses takes on a markedly different and even opposing character. In Marxist-Leninist societies the concept of masses occupies a central role in the construction of a new collective identity grounded in Marxist-Leninist principles (Cheung, 2007, p. 1). Rather than a force to be feared or contained, the masses are here understood through the lens of Marxist theory as the driving force to achieve a new social order (Li, 2018, p. 139). Its core resides in *mass movements*, seen as the basic strategy and practice of the Party itself (Li, 2018, p. 146). In this regard, masses are a vanguard force that needs to be led and educated by the Party (Landsberger, *Chinese Propaganda Posters: From Revolution to Modernization*, 2020, p. 26). To comprehend this contrast, it is important to refer to the works carried out by Xiao (2017), which offer valuable insights into how the concept of the masses was received and reinterpreted within the revolutionary Chinese context. Through a careful overview of some key thinkers of the early twentieth-century revolutionary China, Xiao demonstrates how figures such as Hu Hanmin 胡汉民 (1879-1936), a Chinese politician and one of the early leaders of the *Guomindang* 国民党 (KMT), and Qu Qiubai 瞿秋白 (1899-1935), a political activist who in 1927-1935 served as a *de facto* leader of the CCP, engaged critically with Le Bon's perception, inverting its pessimistic conclusions. While inspired by existing crowd theory, they developed ideas that challenged and reoriented it. Far from being passive or dangerous entities to be feared and contained, they understood the masses as something that must be actively mobilized and politically organized. It is worth noting that works such as Le Bon's, *The Crowd* in particular, left their marks on Chinese political thought over the course of the last century (Xiao, 2017, p.

29); however, what is most significant is precisely the way in which this tradition departed from and inverted their pessimistic conclusions.

Hu Hanmin and Qu Qiubai Perspectives

Hu directly challenged Le Bon's (1895/2025) vision of the crowd as an irrational and destructive force. He reversed his biological metaphor to recast the masses as vital cells capable of social regeneration, as long as they are guided by a revolutionary party into a structured political collective (Xiao, 2017, p. 35-36). Qu, by contrast, maintained a more nuanced position. While acknowledging that crowd movement can reduce individuals to credulous and emotionally driven actors, he distinguished between two kinds of *xishengzhe* 犧牲者 (martyrs): *crowd martyrs*, who do not follow their rational consciousness, and *true martyrs* of the social movement, who retain their rational consciousness and are therefore capable of forging new beliefs and breaking with the old system (Xiao, 2017, p. 36-37). Both thinkers share a common thread, that the masses are not simply a passive or destructive entity, but a regenerative or degenerative force, whose outcome depends on the quality of consciousness and leadership that shapes it.

A further dimension of this contrast is brought by Zhang Jiuru 张九如 (1895-1979), an intellectual who engaged with crowd psychology and delegate to the KMT National Constituent Assembly. Though with a markedly different emphasis less centred on the emancipatory potential of the masses, Zhang Jiuru's study seeks to demonstrate the necessity of controlling the crowd. The objective of understanding the psychological process was to explain how the crowd could accept *zhiyu* 制馭 (mastery) from a mental point of view. He emphasises the crowd's inherent volatility and need for discipline, expressing concern over its transitory, unstable, and amorphous nature (Xiao, 2017, p. 52). Characterized by a lack of self-awareness and no ability to direct itself, *qunzhong* is predisposed to obedience and, constitutionally, calls for a leader (Xiao, 2017, p. 53). The crowd can be more effectively influenced by *means* other than rational reasoning. For

example, Zhang argues, that a capable leader needs to possess certain *pixiang* 皮相 (surface or physical attributes) to be a *crowd leader*, as the presence of a physically imposing person in front of a crowd will leave the crowd dazzled and awed (Xiao, 2017, p. 53).

Masses as Progressive Organism

As mentioned above, a key point that characterizes the Maoist-Marxist perspective is that of attributing to the masses a vanguard-force role. Li (2018), in his work describes the concept of *masses* and its evolution across history. Furthermore, also focuses on the Chinese context:

‘Masses’ is an inherently ambiguous concept that both embodies and realizes the abstract notion of ‘people.’ Unlike a modern citizenry, the masses lack clearly defined rights, responsibilities, education, and rational autonomy. When combined with the idea of ‘group’ (qun [群]), the masses can signify the majority of the population that drives historical progress, but they can also be framed as ‘backward elements’ requiring guidance, education, and awakening by an ‘enlightened’ or ‘vanguard’ force. (p. 153)

This passage captures well the complexity that lies at the heart of the concept of the masses in the Chinese context. As Li (2018) points out, the masses remain a fundamentally ambiguous category. They can be seen at once as the driving force of historical progress and as something that still requires guidance, education, and political awakening. Yet, this ambiguity is quite different from the dismissive irrationalism found in the Western crowd theory. Rather than denying the masses any meaningful agency, it reflects a more nuanced understanding, while also acknowledging that such potential needs to be carefully oriented by a vanguard force in order to bear fruit. “The masses need to be led: this implies that their actions are blighted by blindness, and are easily derailed from the correct course.” (Li, 2018, p. 154).

The Importance of Mobilisation

To illustrate this point more clearly, Cong Riyun 丛日云 (2005) offers a comparative analysis into the conceptualization of masses in the Communist context, interrogating the specificities of the Chinese political tradition against the categories elaborated within modern Western theories:

西方群众理论家生活在民主和法治社会，他们要将群众约束于民主、法治的框架内，纳入精英指导的轨道。列宁和毛泽东都生活在专制社会，他们要将被压迫的、消极沉默的群众动员起来，纳入先锋队引领的方向。先锋队与精英不同，后者需要在民主的框架下，控制和制衡群众；前者并不需要民主框架，只要引导者——追随者关系模式。

Living within democratic, law-governed contexts, Western theorists aim to constrain masses within the bounds of democracy and legal frameworks, channelling them toward an elitist orientation. In contrast, Lenin and Mao Zedong, operating within autocratic societies, sought to mobilize oppressed and passively silent masses, incorporating the concept within a vanguardist and leadership-driven paradigm. Vanguards and élites differ: the latter must function within a democratic framework, exercising control over and establishing checks on the masses; the former, however, operate independently of democratic constraints, relying solely on leadership structures within a follower-oriented relationship.

(p. 20, author's translation)

Cong Riyun's framework is analytically valuable because it offers a new shifting perspective that focuses away from the content of mass psychology and toward the institutional and political conditions that shape how they are conceptualised. The difference between Western

elitism and Leninism-Maoism vanguardism is not merely ideological, but structural. It is the nature of the political system itself that determines whether the masses are to be contained or mobilised. The masses in the Maoist framework may have been mobilised rather than merely constrained, but they were still being directed. This ambiguity, which Cong's lens tends to smooth over, is in fact crucial to understand how propaganda functioned as both an emancipatory and a disciplinary instrument.

The Importance of the Political Context

This distinction clearly highlights how the political and institutional contexts are not merely a backdrop, but an independent variable that shapes the very conceptualization of the masses. In the early stages of his career, when Mao Zedong began engaging with the masses, he encountered a context where large sections of the population were structurally excluded from political life, reduced to a condition of subalternity (see *The Usages of the Term in Siku Quanshu* section above). In autocratic contexts of this kind, the masses are not merely an unruly force to be regulated. They are an oppressed potential to be awakened. In this framework, mobilization is therefore not a danger to be managed but a political tool, an engine of historical transformation. In the Western framework, mass energy is drawn inward, toward institutions, where it is absorbed and neutralized into manageable political outcomes. In the revolutionary framework, by contrast, mass energy is projected outward, amplified and directed toward the transformation of existing structures, with the vanguard serving as the core organizing force behind that projection.

In the Maoist context, the masses are not merely the irrational and threatening agglomerate, that some theorists like Le Bon and Sighele feared and sought to contain. They are a force of progress and historical change, an entity whose collective energy carries within it the potential for social transformation. This potential, however, does not emerge on its own. The masses need to be guided, shown the right direction, and protected from the risk that their own

power turns destructive rather than constructive. Keeping this in mind is not just theoretically useful, but actually necessary for understanding how propaganda works in the Maoist context. The way a society conceives of its masses almost inevitably shapes the way it chooses to address, mobilize, and guide them. It is precisely this relationship that the following sections will set out to explore. Therefore, from now on it is more appropriate to set aside the Western-oriented perspective and focus on the concept of the masses as it has been understood and developed within the Maoist context.

1.2. The Concept of Propaganda and Its Role in Maoist China

Propaganda is not a modern invention; it has always existed. The attempt to influence the way in which the governed viewed the world has always been a characteristic of the rulers throughout history (Welch, *Propaganda: A historical perspective*, 2021, p. 24). What modernity has brought are new means to pursue it. In this section, we will examine where the concept of propaganda itself comes from. As with the notion of the masses explored in the preceding section, propaganda is not a neutral category. Its meaning, moral weight and instrumentalization it is assigned vary depending on the political and cultural tradition within which it is employed. In the following paragraphs an account of the historical origins of propaganda and its development will be given. Consequently, a theoretical definition will be proposed, with the aim of understanding its complexity. At last, the analysis will turn to the ways in which propaganda operates as a system for the construction and transmission of ideological values.

Origins and Historical Evolution of the Concept

The first appearances of the word *propaganda* can be located in the raisings of the Reformation, the moment at which the spiritual and ecclesiastical unity of Europe cracked for the first time in history (Welch, *Propaganda: A historical perspective*, 2021, p. 24). From that point onward, the concept evolved steadily in tandem with scientific and technological development. Its use expanded throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, especially during periods of ideological conflict such as the American War of Independence and the French Revolutionary Wars (Welch, *Propaganda: A historical perspective*, 2021, p. 24). But, at the end of the nineteenth century, the emergence of mass audience changed drastically the connotations of the concept of propaganda. Public opinion could no longer be treated as a marginal or manageable factor in the formulation of government policy. It had become a determining variable in its own right (Welch, *Propaganda: A historical perspective*, 2021, p. 24). The approach with

the masses grew purposefully. More targeted ways of communicating appeared and were seized upon by governments to reach large segments of society in a targeted manner and within relatively short timespans. One example can be found in the Soviet Union, with the appearance of the concept of agitation. “The agitator conveys few ideas [...] to a great many people” (Welch, *Propaganda: A historical perspective*, 2021, p. 24). The purpose of agitation was to influence a large audience through simple slogans and message. This focused approach became instrumental in supporting the deeper spread of Marxism-Leninism among the broader population. The agitator, therefore, proved more effective than a propagandist in the traditional sense (Welch, *Propaganda: A historical perspective*, 2021, p. 24).

Theorisation of Propaganda

This historical trajectory had direct consequences for how the concept was theorised and defined. Farley and Johnson (2021) conceive propaganda as “the deliberate and systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions and direct behaviour to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist” (Farley & Johnson, 2021, p. 3). Propaganda is calculated and organised, and it operates on the whole person, not merely on their rational faculties. It is, in this sense, an inherently instrumental means of communication whose value is entirely determined by its effectiveness in achieving the propagandist’s desired ends. This conception should be integrated with that of Edward Louis Bernays (1928, as cited in Farley & Johnson, 2021), who offered one of the most direct and controversial formulations of the term. For Bernays, propaganda meant nothing less than “the conscious and intelligent manipulation of the masses” a process regarded as positively necessary to the functioning of democratic life, framing it as a regimentation of public opinion for constructive purposes (1928, as cited in Farley & Johnson, 2021, p. 3). Instead of hiding the manipulative nature of propaganda, he acknowledges it highlighting the tension between mass communication and political power. The

systematic shaping of opinion is not the exclusive prerogative of authoritarian regimes, but an inherent feature of any modern political order that seeks to govern large populations. This observation carries relevant implications for the analysis of the Maoist case, where propaganda was likewise presented not as manipulation but as education, not as coercion but as enlightenment.

Propaganda's Semi-educational Objective

Among the most analytically rigorous treatments of propaganda in the scholarly literature, the work of Jacques Ellul (1962/1991) stands out for its systematic refusal of simplified definitions. In his foundational study *Propagandes*, he explicitly rejects the idea that propaganda can be reduced to a tool of manipulation. While acknowledging that it does not constitute a fully-fledged science, he insists that it is nonetheless a *technique* grounded in the human sciences, and in particular in social psychology (Ellul, 1962/1991, p. 15). Starting from a systematic knowledge of human beings, including their tendencies, desires, needs, psychological mechanisms, and behavioural automatisms, the propagandist is able to organise a set of “thought control techniques” (Shambaugh, *China's Propaganda System: Institutions, Processes and Efficacy*, 2007, pp. 26-27). These include tricks, and practices aimed at reshaping targeted opinions of the population (Ellul, 1962/1991, p. 15). The objective has a semi-educational character. It does not simply aim to deceive, but to modify opinions on the subject through systematic and sustained action on the human mind (Ellul, 1962/1991, pp. 8-9).

Propaganda as a Tool for Transformation

Ellul's framework results particularly valuable for this analysis for two reasons. First, it draws attention to the technical and systematic character of propaganda, its dependence on organised knowledge of human psychology rather than brute coercion. Second, and more importantly, it opens up the possibility of understanding propaganda as something considerably more than manipulation in the pejorative sense, as a form of organised persuasion that operates

at the intersection of knowledge, power, and affect, that aims not merely to inform or deceive but to transform. This dimension, as we shall see, is central to the Maoist conception of propaganda, where the ultimate objective was not the transmission of a message but the production of a *new* kind of human subject (Kang, 2023, p. 14).

Ideological Construction of Values

To understand how propaganda achieves this transformative function, it is necessary to introduce the concepts of *ideology* and *value*. Van Dijk(1998) provides a particularly useful framework in these terms. Ideologies operate by furnishing groups and their members with shared evaluative beliefs, telling them what is good or bad, wrong or right, legitimate or illegitimate (Van Dijk, 1998, p. 33). Since these beliefs are by definition socially shared, they take the form of general and abstract social opinions that orient the behaviour and judgements of group members across a wide range of contexts. At their foundation lie values, the shared mental objects of social cognition that “form the basis of all processes of evaluation, and hence for opinions, attitudes and ideologies” (Van Dijk, 1998, p. 74). Taken together, these constitute the moral order of a society.

Beliefs and Social Opinions

What all this makes clear is that propaganda, understood as the systematic vehicle through which ideologies are constructed and transmitted, is not simply in the business of conveying information or building consent. It is engaged in the construction of a moral order. It becomes the production, and inculcation, of the values, beliefs, and social opinions through which a group comes to understand itself, its enemies, and its place in history. This is essential for understanding the Maoist case, where propaganda did not merely relay political instructions from the Party to the masses, but sought to reconstitute the very evaluative framework through which Chinese citizens perceived their social world.

Censorship and Active Production

Censorship in another further dimension of propaganda as a political instrument that deserves attention. Propaganda's function is not merely as a tool of censorship and negative control, but instead as a proactive institution of ideological management. Farley and Johnson (2021) describe the propaganda system in its most developed form, as an institution for managing ideology both within the Communist Party itself and in the wider non-party society beyond it (Farley & Johnson, 2021, p. 1). This dual function, simultaneously disciplining the vanguard and shaping the citizens, captures something essential about the scope and ambition of fully developed propaganda systems. Shambaugh (2007) makes a related but equally important distinction in the specific context of the CCP. Censorship, he observes, represents "only one side of the coin" (Shambaugh, 2007, p. 29). The CCPPD (Chinese Communist Party Propaganda Department) was far more regularly engaged in what he describes as *proactive propaganda*, writing and disseminating the information the Party believed *should* be transmitted to and internalised by various sectors of the population (Shambaugh, 2007, p. 29). It reflects the fact that, for the CCP, *xuanchuan* 宣传 (propaganda), it was understood as the education of the masses, a tool for building the society the Party sought to create (Shambaugh, 2007, p. 29). Nor did this posture remain confined to the Maoist era. As Farley and Johnson (2021) note, propaganda continued to be deployed also in the post-Mao period as an inoculation against what the Party regarded as the corrupting influence of Western values, its reach extending progressively into frontier regions and minority communities, its legitimating frameworks evolving but its fundamental logic remaining intact (Farley & Johnson, 2021, p. 2).

Propaganda Definition

From the analysis conducted, it is therefore possible to deduce that propaganda is not an exclusive tool of authoritarian regimes, but rather an intrinsic feature of all modern political

systems. It represents a means through which states seek to guide public opinion for political purposes, shaping attitudes and behaviours in a manner consistent with the political and social objectives of the context in which they operate. Furthermore, propaganda can be understood as a semi-science. It draws on the understanding of human desires, fears, and automatic behavioural mechanisms to develop techniques for orienting behaviour. Such techniques do not necessarily have a coercive character. On the contrary, they often serve a semi-educational function, aimed at internalizing values and patterns of behaviour considered desirable. A fundamental feature of this framework is its systematic nature, which allows for the construction of a true ideological framework, where socially shared values and beliefs become the lens through which reality is interpreted and evaluated. Finally, propaganda is not limited to the use of coercive tools or the removal of undesired content, i.e. censorship. Its core operation lies in active production, so-called *active propaganda*, and in the dissemination of strategic information designed to be perceived and internalized by the population. Through this approach, the aim is to shape collective perception by the targeted dissemination of messages consistent with the guiding ideology, thus creating an environment in which certain values permeate citizens' lives and certain beliefs become socially shared norms.

1.3. Propaganda as a Tool for Mobilising Masses in Maoist China

Once the concept of propaganda has been analysed, it is possible to turn to its specific application in the Maoist context. It was a context, as this section will argue, that gave rise to one of the most ambitious and far-reaching propaganda systems of the twentieth century. In the following paragraphs, the historical and cultural roots of the means and objectives of Maoist propaganda will be examined, including the concept of *jiaohua* 教化 (to transform through moral-political education) and the use of educational role models. The mechanisms of discourse propagation and emotional mobilization will also be discussed. Finally, the analysis will turn to the media employed by Maoist propaganda, with a particular focus on the sphere of visual propaganda.

The Confucian Concept of *Jiaohua*

Propaganda, in the Chinese context, lies within a much longer cultural and political tradition, one that predates the communist revolution by more than two millennia. A striking illustration of this depth is offered by Cheek (2021) in his analysis of the concept of *jiaohua* 教化 (to transform through moral-political education). The term derives from the principle *yi li jiaomin* 以礼教民 (to transform people through the Rites), found in the *Liji* 礼记, and repeatedly invoked by Chinese governments and leading thinkers over the past two thousand years (Cheek, 2021, p. 40). This reflects a deep and enduring belief among China's cultural and political elite in the educability of human beings. People can be taught how to be good, and correct ways of acting, thinking, and speaking can directly contribute to moral formation. Role models, and above all the top leaders, such as emperors or heads of state, need to adopt an exemplary conduct to radiate outward through society. They are not merely symbolic figures but active instruments of governance (Cheek, 2021, p. 40). This tradition has direct implications for a full understanding

of the Maoist propaganda system. The construction of model figures to be emulated, the use of exemplary narratives, the insistence on correct behaviour and correct thought, all of these features of Maoist political culture find their antecedents in the long history of *jiaohua* as a tool of governance (Cheek, 2021, p. 44). The CCP did not invent the idea that human subjects could be transformed through sustained moral-political education; it inherited it and fused it with communist theory.

This continuity is further reinforced by Zuo (1991). He observes that throughout Chinese history, the legitimacy of the political regime was built upon the charismatic authority of the ruler, a model of authority that “did not change when the Communist Party came to power” (Zuo, 1991, p. 99). Mao, in this light, was not simply a revolutionary leader on the Soviet model; rather, he can be considered in the manner of an emperor in the longstanding Chinese mode, whose authority and moral exemplarity were central to the functioning of the system he was building. Through tools, such as categorical statements, repetition, and contagion, he was able to mobilise the masses by virtue of the authority he embodied (Li, 2018, p. 138). This demonstrates how the Maoist Chinese propaganda case must not be understood as a mere importation of the Soviet model, but as a phenomenon more deeply rooted in the country’s own political and cultural tradition. These mechanisms were not only foreign importations, they were deeply rooted features of Chinese political and cultural life, now employed in the service of the new Party-State revolutionary project.

The Origins of the Maoist Propaganda System

Despite these deep cultural roots, the Maoist propaganda system was not simply a modernised version of traditional Chinese statecraft. It can be considered as a hybrid construction, one that drew on multiple sources and adapted them to the specific constraints of the Chinese revolutionary context. When Mao came to power and established the People’s Republic, he had

to face a logistical challenge that could not be underestimated. This comprehended a relatively weak media infrastructure and a population in which illiteracy was widespread, particularly among the peasantry, that constituted the social base of the revolution (Farley, 2021, p. 58). Effective propaganda could not rely primarily on the written word.

Leninist Influence on the Maoist System

In response to these constraints, Maoism drew on a diverse array of sources and models. What it was produced it was not an imitation of any single model, rather an original readaptation shaped by the peculiarities of the Chinese mentality and folk tradition (Giwojno, 2019, p. 96). As a young man, he had studied Leninist principles of propaganda, eventually adapting them to the Chinese cultural and historical experience, particularly Lenin's foundational distinction between propaganda and agitation; the former aimed at the deeper ideological formation of a smaller vanguard, the latter at the simpler emotional mobilisation of the masses (Welch, *Propaganda: A historical perspective*, 2021, pp. 31-32). But the Leninist inheritance was only one component.

Propaganda Tools Employed

The resulting infrastructure was unprecedented. Shambaugh (2007) provides one of the most comprehensive overviews of the thought control techniques deployed by the regime's *xuanchuan xitong* 宣传系统 (propaganda system). However, it is important to notice that these methods were not static nor uniformly applied. The Mao era saw considerable variation in the form of propaganda across different periods, localities, and target audiences. In the specific case of female mobilization and emancipation, for instance, certain methods proved particularly effective than others, such as the construction of model figures to be emulated through exemplary figures, or the visual representation of a happy society in which women occupied roles outside traditional gender boundaries. A more thorough analysis of this will be carried in Chapter 2 and

3 of this study. With this in mind, the techniques more broadly deployed by the *xuanchuan xitong* included mass mobilisation campaigns, along with the construction of model figures to be emulated and the creation of study groups and ideological monitors at every level of the social hierarchy. Incarceration was also implemented for the purposes of thought reform, the promulgation of a constant stream of documents to be memorised, tough control of educational content and media output, a nationwide system of loudspeakers reaching into every neighbourhood and village, and dedicated teams, called *xuanchuan dui* 宣传队 (propaganda groups), tasked with the indoctrination of specific population segments (Shambaugh, 2007, pp. 26-27).

The Aim of Propaganda System

This project did not aim at constructing a simple system of information management, but a total political apparatus aimed at the cognitive and affective transformation of the entire society. “Propaganda in the Chinese context was not only a total media system [i.e., one that operated through all available channels] it was a political project” (Cheek, 2021, p. 44). Party representatives were expected to go among the people, identify their needs and concern and synthesise there with ideological. Only then they returned to the masses to disseminate the Party’s formulations in such a way that people would internalise them as their own values. This process, known as “from the masses, to the masses”, was conceived as a form of mass transformation through education, like a modern form of *jiaohua* (Cheek, 2021, p. 49). It constituted the concrete application of Maoist leadership methods. Notably, this project was not conceived as purely top-down. Internal CCP documents from the period reveal an explicit insistence on the supervision of the masses, a recognition that the Party’s necessity to educate and lead depended on maintaining contact with and accountability to the popular base (Cheek, 2021, p. 44).

Producing the *New Man*

At the heart of the Maoist propaganda lies the ambition of producing a *new* kind of citizen. This ambition was rooted in a broader cultural project of national regeneration that preceded the communist revolution. In early twentieth-century China the cultural elite had already embraced a highly gendered narrative of modernisation, conceiving the transformation of the nation as first and foremost a project of *masculinising* a civilisation they perceived as weakened and feminised by the traditional Confucian tradition (Kang, 2023, p. 11). The new ideal, informed by science, technology, military discipline, and models of hegemonic masculinity, was not merely an aesthetic preference but a political programme. Only by producing this new kind of man could China regain its footing in a world dominated by foreign imperialist powers (Kang, 2023, p. 11).

Yan'an Rectification Campaign

The communist revolution radicalised and transformed this project. The Yan'an Rectification Campaign of 1942–44 represented perhaps the most concentrated effort to realise it. Its aim was to eliminate all ideological differences among cadres and intellectuals and to remould them into *new men*, subjects fully aligned with Maoist thought and committed without reservation to the revolutionary cause (Kang, 2023, p. 14). By 1944, the Party-State had emerged from this process as a *single discourse community* centred on Mao and his thought, a unified ideological space in which dissent had been systematically eliminated and the foundations of the future totalitarian state had been laid (Kang, 2023, p. 14).

New Peasants and New Masses

Equally significant was the way in which propaganda reshaped the fundamental categories through which Chinese citizens understood their social world. As Huang X. (2018) notes, class was an alien concept in revolutionary China. Following the Marxist-Leninist tradition, the CCP analysed the Chinese society primarily in terms of class struggle, defining the revolution

as the overthrow of the old class order and the creation of a new egalitarian society free of exploitation and oppression. The concepts of *peasant* and *masses* were therefore not neutral descriptive terms in the Maoist lexicon; they became politically charged by what the CCP actively inculcated into the minds of the rural population (Kang, 2023, p. 18). By redefining the peasantry as the quintessential revolutionary class, and by designating workers, peasants, and the labouring class as the core of the masses, Mao's New Democratic culture was explicitly built from the ground up, proletarian-led, anti-imperialist, and anti-feudal, as Mao himself defined it (Farley, 2021, p. 58). Culture was not a superstructural ornament but became a primary site of political struggle. Chinese society became increasingly defined by its rural and labouring character, and every peasant and worker was called upon to engage actively in the collective endeavour of nation-building. The designation of workers, peasants, and the labouring class at the core of the masses (Kang, 2023, p. 18) was a reflection of social reality.

The Cult of Personality Like Religion

One of the most interesting dimensions of Maoist propaganda is its structural resemblance to religious worship, a resemblance that is more striking given the communist regime's official commitment to atheism and its attempt to suppress traditional religious practices. The Marxist critique of religion, as recalled by Zuo (1991) held it to be a form of false consciousness, "an illusion that obscured the nature of class interests and prevented the oppressed from doing anything to change their miserable situation" (Zuo, 1991, pp. 100-101). Accordingly, following the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949, the new communist regime declared religion a superstition to be replaced by Marxist doctrine and moved to suppress traditional religious activities (Zuo, 1991, pp. 100-101). The irony is that at precisely the same moment as it sought to destroy traditional religion, the Chinese communist regime initiated and encouraged a new religion of its own. Maoist propaganda tended to centre on the figure of Mao Zedong, who was,

almost overnight, seen as a god and widely worshipped by the people. “Mao was glorified as ‘the Red Sun’, ‘the Great Teacher’, ‘the Great Leader’, ‘the Great Commander’, ‘the Great Steersman’, and significantly, ‘the Messiah of Working People’” (Zuo, 1991, p. 101).

De-humanisation

De-humanisation was a structural feature of the propaganda system rooted in the deeper logic of Chinese political culture. As Powell and Wong (1997) note, theories of totalitarianism observe that propaganda serves to dehumanise individuals as they lose their sense of self and submit to a higher ideological cause, and Mao’s increasingly deified cult of personality was the most visible expression of this process (Powell & Wong, 1997, p. 783). This was a process that unfolded gradually from the outset, growing increasingly pervasive before reaching its peak during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Images of the leader began to circulate in the everyday environment of citizens from the earliest reform campaigns, becoming ever more ubiquitous over time (Powell & Wong, 1997, p. 783; Landsberger, 2011, p. 19). Beyond his visual presence, his quotations were cited ritually, revolutionary songs were sung religiously, and the images, sounds, and ideas of Mao inundated the lives of ordinary people (Powell & Wong, 1997, p. 783). The analogy with religion is emblematic. The Maoist propaganda system reproduced in a secular key the central mechanisms of religious devotion. It is possible to identify a range of features typically associated with religions or cults: a sacred iconography, like the ubiquitous portraits of Mao; a canonical text, the *Little Red Book*; collective liturgy, revolutionary songs and ritual recitation; confession and redemption, thought reform and self-criticism sessions; and the promise of a transcendent future, communist utopia. Understanding this quasi-religious architecture is essential for appreciating the emotional and affective power of Maoist visual propaganda as a devotional object in its own right.

The Patterns of Maoist Propaganda

In order to analyse appropriately the mechanisms through which Maoist propaganda operated, Liu's (2010) framework of three discourse propagation techniques and three mobilisation patterns represents a suitable analytical lens. What makes this account valuable is that it moves beyond a generic description of propaganda as persuasion or manipulation, identifying instead the specific emotional and cognitive paths through which revolutionary discourse was transmitted, internalised, and made personally worthwhile. However, it is important to note that they were not applied uniformly across the population.

A. Personalisation

Personalisation is the systematic translation of national revolutionary discourse into individual personal stories. While all communist states shared a similar macro-discourse, China was, the only one to develop a systematic method for having this discourse digested at the micro-level of individual experience (Liu, 2010, p. 334). "Instead of simply 'indoctrinated' in the official discourse, the masses were urged to join the authorship of the discourse by adding their own 'raw material'" (Liu, 2010, p. 334) i.e., transforming collective ideology into personal narrative, and in doing so internalising it at a depth that mere instruction could not achieve. The theoretical underpinning of this technique draws on the concept of *cognitive dissonance*, the greater the personal effort invested in articulating a belief, the greater the resulting change in attitude (Liu, 2010, p. 334).

B. Magnification

Magnification operated through the systematic politicisation of all aspects of life, including the most ordinary thoughts and behaviours. In the light of political interpretation, no word or deed remained ordinary. Everything could be rendered significant, charged with ideological meaning or connected to the stakes of the revolutionary struggle. Liu (2010) describes

this as the construction of an exegetic road on which the contemporary could travel to the eternal, the personal to the national, and the contingent to the inevitable (Liu, 2010, p. 335). This formulation captures precisely the totalising ambition of the Maoist project. By sustaining an extremely high level of political consciousness, magnification generated guilt in those who deviated from the official line and an intense sense of self-righteousness in those who conformed to it (Liu, 2010, p. 335).

C. Moralisation

Through *moralisation*, rather than presenting class enemies as the embodiment of impersonal social institutions, they are depicted as morally inferior individuals: corrupt, selfish, and personally culpable, while presenting the revolutionary classes as morally superior exemplars of socialist humanity (Liu, 2010, p. 335). This structural-personal inversion of the personal is a deliberate rhetorical strategy. In fact, only by framing socioeconomic injustice as a matter of individual moral failing, can emotions be maximally stirred and the energy required for mass mobilisation can be generated (Liu, 2010, p. 335)

D. Emotional mobilisation

Built upon these three discursive techniques, Liu (2010) identifies three broader patterns of emotional mobilisation: *victimisation*, *redemption*, and *emancipation*. Each targets a specific emotional register and social group. *Redemption*, which targeted class enemies and bourgeois intellectuals; and *emancipation* appealed primarily to nationalist sentiments across a broader social spectrum (Liu, 2010, p. 332). This distinction highlights the sophistication of the Maoist propaganda apparatus, capable of addressing different social positions through distinct emotional registers.

E. Victimisation

Victimisation was employed to depict ordinary peasants and workers as innocent victims of ‘villains’ who had unjustly dispossessed them of their entitlements (Liu, 2010, p. 336). By framing social suffering as the product of deliberate injustice rather than structural conditions, this pattern provoked anger, the primary emotional fuel of the struggle movements and mass campaigns through which Maoist political life was organised. The emotional logic was simple and powerful. In fact, if your suffering has been caused by a culprit, identified as a ‘class enemy’ by the Party, and the Party has identified that culprit, then struggle becomes not only possible but imperative.

F. Redemption

By contrast, *redemption* targeted those class enemies or bourgeois intellectuals, subjecting them to a process of reform aimed at producing moral transformation. To make people surrender to thought reform, it was essential for the Party to make them recognise their own sins. E.g., the sin of prioritising personal development above the collective cause; valuing comfort over hard labour; enjoying bourgeois art and music; the sin of *individuality* itself (Liu, Maoist Discourse and the Mobilization of Emotions in Revolutionary China, 2010, p. 344). The guilt generated by this process is not derived from deliberation, rather “it was a conclusion [established] before thinking started” (Liu, Maoist Discourse and the Mobilization of Emotions in Revolutionary China, 2010, p. 346). *Redemption* from this *guilt* was available through action and political loyalty. Being professionally and politically active became a method of self-salvation (Liu, 2010, p. 350), this permitted the production of subjects whose commitment to the cause was not merely instrumental but motivated by an existential motor.

G. Emancipation

Lastly, *emancipation* offered a projection of the future, a utopian horizon against which the sacrifices of the present could be rendered meaningful. “Reconfiguration of production relations [promised by the Party] could generate rapid growth and the release of human willpower could create a communist utopia” (Liu, *Maoist Discourse and the Mobilization of Emotions in Revolutionary China*, 2010, p. 351). In this project, the agency of ordinary people, their *willpower*, their collective determination, was assigned a primary role (Liu, *Maoist Discourse and the Mobilization of Emotions in Revolutionary China*, 2010, p. 353). The masses were told that they could break the laws of history and accomplish the impossible, a message whose mobilising power lay precisely in its flattery of popular agency and its promise of historical redemption (Liu, *Maoist Discourse and the Mobilization of Emotions in Revolutionary China*, 2010, p. 353).

These three patterns constitute a complete emotional framework of the revolution. It covered the full spectrum of affective experience from anger to guilt and hope. At the same time, it was also capable of addressing every position in the social system. It is against this backdrop that the role of visual propaganda becomes fully intelligible. The propaganda poster was not merely a medium for delivering messages, but a primary vehicle through which this emotional framework was made visible and provided in an accessible form.

Visual Media Employment

Among the many instruments available to the regime, the visual poster emerged as perhaps one of the most distinctive and widely disseminated medium of that system. This is partly explained by the structural constraints of the Chinese context, but also by the particular power that visual communication exercises over its audience. Images operate through association and emotional resonance, reaching their viewers through affective channels (Müller & Özcan, 2007,

p. 287). For a regime whose primary ambition was not to inform, but to transform, the visual medium was a convenient and strategic option. As previously cited, Mao came to power in a country with a relatively weak media infrastructure and a large peasant population with low levels of literacy (Welch, 2021, p. 30). A propaganda system which relied primarily on the written word, through media such as newspapers, pamphlets, or official documents, would have been structurally incapable of reaching the majority of the population it sought to transform. The propaganda poster was a solution to this challenge.

Poster as an Accessible Means

As observed by Fidelius (1998, as cited in Hilbertova, 2012), “posters were used as a major vehicle for transferring political messages to the masses. They are an exceptional visual form in that their function and design are geared to be instantly comprehensible by a large portion of the population” (1998, as cited in Hilbertova, 2012, p. 181). They communicated their messages through image, colour, and composition rather than through the written word, making them accessible to viewers regardless of their level of formal education. This accessibility was further reinforced by the cultural basis on which poster communication operated. As Evans and Donald (1999, cited by Hilbertova, 2012) note, “posters are mostly based on people’s cultural and social knowledge, not on knowledge reached by a school education” (Evans & Donald, 1998, as cited in Hilbertova, 2012, p. 181) enabling to reach people almost every different social level and educational background.

Early Developments of Posters

The Party-State chose to link its visual propaganda to already established *old culture* traditions (Landsberger S. R., 2020, p. 34). In the early years of the People’s Republic, considerable attention was given to the development of mass communication strategies that could resonate with broad segments of the population. A telling example is the article *On Developing*

the Renewed New Year Pictures, published in the China Daily on 27 November 1949. It explicitly advocated the adaptation of traditional and pre-existent forms of communication for new ideological purposes, signed by the head of the governmental Culture Department (Pan, 2014, p. 292; Giwojno, 2019, p. 96).

***Nianhua* Influence**

Posters were also a medium deeply rooted in pre-existing forms of Chinese popular visual culture. They drew on familiar visual traditions that already existed in the familiar domestic spaces. Among these, the form of *nianhua* 年画 (new year pictures) (Pan, 2014, p. 290), comic strips and other popular images (Landsberger, Chinese Propaganda Posters: From Revolution to Modernization, 2020, p. 21-22). These kinds of means were widely distributed because they were easily comprehended across dialectal linguistic boundaries (Pan, 2014, p. 290); e.g., a message formulated in standard Mandarin could be entirely incomprehensible to large portions of the rural population in southern China. Other existing means, such as protest prints, contributed to the development of politically mobilizing visual language; but *nianhua*, and their aesthetic, with their established symbolic repertoire and deep cultural resonance, provided the most effective model for large-scale visual communication (Landsberger S. R., 2020, p. 21-22). The citizens, especially the peasants, responded positively to the old visual idioms and symbolisms used in the colourful, popular New Year prints style (Landsberger S. R., 2020, p. 33-34). As Landsberger (2020) himself notes, the sheer volume of prints produced and successfully employed in combatting illiteracy in the north-western rural areas during the New Year's Propaganda Movement of 1949 demonstrates the capacity of this visual tradition to communicate effectively across non-literate audience (Landsberger S. R., 2020, p. 34). The fact that visual material of this kind was employed on such a large scale speaks to how well it resonated with peasants and how effective it proved as a communicative tool.



Figure 1: *Picture of a nianhua*
 Unknown (19th-20th century)
 Source: jstor.com

Socialist Realism

That of the poster was a medium ideally suited to the specific communicative demands of *shehuizhuyi xianshi zhuyi* 社会主义现实主义 (socialist realism), i.e. the official aesthetic doctrine of the Maoist period (Ranta, 2020, pp. 9-10). Stylistically, socialist-realist model human figures are rendered in detail, modelled carefully in light and shade with clear contours, appearing and acting in illusionistic spaces. It was aimed at representing glorified depictions of communist values such as the emancipation of the proletariat by means of this “realistic” imagery. Some general stylistic characteristics are: figurative naturalistic and easily comprehensible images; strong, bold colours and clear outlines of figures, especially in woodcuts; optimistic moods, represented through happy model citizens, such as peasants, youngsters, soldiers, workers in factories taking up energetic poses and displaying healthy bodies (Ranta, 2020, pp. 9-10). Gender distinctions were diminished in stereotypical masculinized bodies, wearing baggy sexless clothes

(Ranta, 2020, p. 10). All this perfectly suited the Party-State's aim to depict reality. It was not a neutral aesthetic, but an explicit political one. It demanded of the artist the truthful representation of reality in its revolutionary development, to educate and mobilise the masses in the spirit of socialism. "Portraying the bright side", as Mao had already outlined in 1942, meant depicting a utopian vision of communist society, visually convincing and lifelike in style, yet prescriptive rather than descriptive in content (Cheung, 2007, pp. 3-4). As Cheung (2007) notes, artistic works produced in the socialist realist mode were narrative and anecdotal in character, their content intended to be read, to be interpreted as a text carrying a political message, with the aim of educating and transforming its viewer (Cheung, 2007, p. 4). The propaganda poster, in this framework, was not a decoration or an illustration. It was a political argument rendered in visual form, a condensed expression of the emotional grammar of the revolution addressed to a mass audience that could see, even if it could not always read. A more comprehensive description of Socialist realism and its implication for the production of visual propaganda is provided in Chapter 3.2.

The analysis conducted thus far allows us to deduce that Maoist propaganda was not a mere importation of foreign models, but rather something more deeply rooted in the cultural context. This is clearly evidenced by its educational and didactic value, derived from the Confucian tradition; by the use of role models as exemplary figures for proper conduct; and by the adoption of a culturally grounded aesthetic inspired by *nianhua*, comic strips, and popular images already present within Chinese households. At the same time, it may be considered a hybrid model. Mao's profound cultural background and personal knowledge enabled him to effectively integrate also elements originating from external contexts, such as the Leninist concept of mass agitation or the cult of personality found in other totalitarian regimes. Maoist propaganda further confirms its systematic and all-encompassing nature (as discussed previously

in Chapter 1.2), through the use of numerous techniques aimed at permeating every aspect of citizens' lives in a manner that was semi-religious and closely resembled that of a cult. In this way, particularly through emotional mobilization, it sought to create new peasants and masses, i.e., the foundational base of the nation and of the revolution carried forward by the Party-State. All of this was achieved through a wide range of communication media. Among these was the poster, particularly effective due to its broad accessibility and appealing aesthetic. Hence, the following section will examine in greater detail the apparatus of visual propaganda and the use of posters.

1.4. Visual Propaganda in the Maoist Propaganda Apparatus

In the preceding section, the foundations of the Maoist propaganda system were established. In this section the analysis will focus more specifically on the visual dimension of propaganda, with particular attention to the propaganda poster. Some core concepts will be introduced to facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the Maoist visual propaganda apparatus. These include political iconography, which helps to explain the influence of images within political frameworks; *Pathosformeln* and *Propageme*, key notions for understanding the role of emotions in political imagery and the mechanisms through which propaganda achieves its impact; and “*Homeworld*” and “*Alienworld*”, concepts employed by the Party-State to define how social norms, behaviours and normality should be interpreted. Following this conceptual framework, the analysis will examine how these ideas were operationalized in the Party-State’s visual propaganda, showing how posters were able to effectively transmit values and mobilize citizens emotionally.

Images in Politics

The study of images as political instruments has given rise to the field of political iconography, a discipline that investigates the concepts, topics, and motives of political visuality, as well as their historical continuities and disruptions (Egea Medrano, Garrido Rubia, & Rojo Martinez, 2021, p. 216). What makes political iconography analytically powerful is its insistence that images do not merely represent political reality but actively shape it. “Pictures do not only offer representations of political problems, positions, and programmes, but [...] they also influence reality and can intervene in actual conditions” (Egea Medrano, Garrido Rubia, & Rojo Martinez, 2021, p. 216). This capacity is inseparable from the logic through which visual sources operate. Unlike written texts such as academic or journalistic texts, which rely on argumentations and reasoning, images communicate through association, connecting meaning laterally. They

bypass deliberative thought, reaching their audiences through affective and argumentative channels (Müller & Özcan, 2007, p. 287). In this sense, the visual image does not simply reflect politics but actively participates in it, capable of mobilising emotions, directing behaviour, and constructing the categories through which citizens understand their social world.

Pathosformeln

For capturing the specific mechanisms through which this political work is employed, it is important to introduce the concept of *Pathosformeln* exhaustively described by Egea Medrano, Garrido Rubia and Rojo Martinez (2021). As described by Aby Warburg's (as cited in Egea Medrano, Garrido Rubia, & Rojo Martinez, 2021, p. 219), the concept of *Pathosformeln* (pathos formula) corresponds to recurring iconic images, gestures, or facial expressions that carry emotionally charged meaning across historical contexts, political systems, and national borders. Political images draw on these inherited visual formulas to activate pre-existing emotional responses in their viewers, lending them an affective power that goes beyond their explicit content. In addition to basic emotions, there are more complex emotions of social nature, such as pride, joy, anxiety etc. Among these, the most important ones for political are enthusiasm, fear and anger (Damasio, 2005, as cited in Egea Medrano, Garrido Rubia & Rojo Martinez, 2021, p. 224).

Enthusiasm is experienced when individuals perceive the surrounding system as responding positively to their actions; while hope offers the possibility of actively shaping a better future. Fear's main function is to act as a signal of danger, particularly suitable for those individuals who are more receptive to warnings, while anger is a powerful mobilizing tool that motivates people to endorse and support risky or punitive actions (Egea Medrano, Garrido Rubia, & Rojo Martinez, 2021, pp. 224-226). To reinforce these emotional narratives, political actors frequently draw on specific iconographic imagery, since visuals lend themselves particularly well

to prospective thinking, the imaginative projection of a better future conduct. They invite the viewer to project forward and imagine the future the image depicts as attainable (Egea Medrano, Garrido Rubia, & Rojo Martinez, 2021, pp. 224-225). As will be shown (see *Emotional Mobilisation* section below), the Maoist propaganda apparatus systematically employed these emotional registers in its visual production.

Propageme

In its initial phase, a propaganda system operates through the systematic production and repetition of specific contents (Shambaugh, *China's Propaganda System: Institutions, Processes and Efficacy*, 2007, p. 26-27), such as slogans, narratives, and images with the explicit aim of inculcating them in the target population (Landsberger, *Chinese Propaganda Posters: From Revolution to Modernization*, 2020, p. 34). When these contents are repeated with sufficient frequency and consistency to be internalized, across generations and shifting political contexts, they cease to be perceived as political messages and become shared cultural references, part of the taken-for-granted background of social life. In this way, it becomes possible to convey specific messages in such a manner that they are no longer experienced as external impositions but as self-evident truths. For capturing the specific mechanisms through which this political work is employed, it is important to introduce the concept of *Propageme*. As described by Peter Gries (2005, as cited in Mittler, 2008), it is defined as:

Contents of propaganda, rhetorical markers with political content, and more or less complex narratives that have been repeatedly and successfully communicated to a target group over a longer period of time, probably across generational and political boundaries, through the mass media. (p. 471)

A *propageme* is not simply a message that has been transmitted, but one that has been transmitted successfully enough to take on a life on its own across generations. Its strategic value

resides precisely in its capacity to render propaganda invisible. When an idea or an image cease to be experienced as political and becomes common sense, it acquires a form of legitimacy that no explicit political argument could confer upon it. This is exactly the effect the Maoist regime sought to produce through the systematic repetition of Mao's image, revolutionary symbols, class struggle narratives etc. The image of Mao is the most eloquent illustration of this dynamic. It continues to circulate, to be recognised, and to evoke meaning well beyond the end of the Maoist era, a persistence that stands as the clearest measure of its propagandistic success.



Figure 2: A seller from Guangdong surrounded by his wares.
Source: thechinaproject.com

Homeworld and Alienworld

A further theoretical lens shows how visual propaganda constructed the boundary between the revolutionary collective and its enemies. The concepts of “*Homeworld*” and “*Alienworld*”, introduced by Ranta (2020), describe the way in which all societies construct models of their own culture in opposition to other cultures (Ranta, 2020, p. 3). The *Homeworld*

designates the community of subjects who share a common lifeworld, a system of values and meanings that defines what counts as normal. The Alienworld, by contrast, is whatever is considered as abnormal, distant to a standard of normality and incapable of meaningful communication (Ranta, 2020, p. 3). Maoist propaganda posters were powerful machines for producing and stabilising exactly this boundary (see also Chapter 1.2, *Ideological Construction of Values* section above). They celebrated the virtuous, hard-working, collectively oriented revolutionary subject while systematically depicting class enemies and foreign influences as belonging to an Alienworld beyond the pale of legitimate social participation.

The Propaganda Poster in the Maoist System

It is against this theoretical backdrop that the specific deployment of the propaganda poster in Maoist China must be understood. The poster was one of the primary instruments through which this double function was realised, simultaneously addressing the population and, as Evans (2021) argues, serving as a “window through which society became more legible, predictable and controllable” to the political and bureaucratic (Evans H. , 2021, p. 149). Propaganda, in this sense, standardised the values, behaviours, and emotional responses in ways that made the population more transparent and therefore more governable. The works of art that were to serve the Party’s purpose had to be popular, direct, easy to understand, with simple messages and easy to reproduce in large numbers (Pan, 2014, p. 290). The result was a visual language that privileged clarity, legibility, and immediate emotional impact over complexity. Most posters were accompanied by captions and slogans designed to urge a particular response from the viewer, anchoring the image’s meaning and directing its interpretation (Evans H. , 2021, p. 150). However, it is important to notice that argumentation and affect were not mutually exclusive domains in this visual language. The verbal message of the caption operated in conjunction with the emotional charge of the image; while slogan directed the viewer’s rational

understanding, a recurring set of visual codes used to suggest positive meanings at a pre-rational subconscious level. Among these, some examples are the rays of a bright sun, which was a symbol of transcendental authority (Evans H. , 2021, p. 150), or the colour red, used to suggest that the message conveyed would bring good fortune (Bhardwaj, 2020, p. 11). This visual language was spread through posters across every subject matter, from collective agriculture and industrial labour to health education and family life, consistently orienting their imagery towards the bright future of socialism (Evans H. , 2021, p. 150). A further analysis of these visual codes will be developed in Chapter 3.

Visual Models of the *Socialist New Person*

The CCP leadership believed in the perfectibility of the people, and was convinced that by participating in revolutionary activities, new social relationships would emerge that would cultivate the *shehui zhuyi xinren* 社会主义新人 (socialist new man/person) (Liu, Maoist Discourse and the Mobilization of Emotions in Revolutionary China, 2010, p. 344) envisioned by Marx and Lenin (Landsberger, Chinese Propaganda Posters: From Revolution to Modernization, 2020, p. 24). For Lenin, the *New Man* was the long-term horizon of the communist project; a fully formed, politically conscious individual who has shed spontaneous consciousness in favour of a genuinely socialist one (Porshneva, 2019, p. 71). He conceived this transformation as the ultimate goal of communism, to be achieved gradually through the sustained education of the working masses (Porshneva, 2019, p. 70). The *New Man* was not merely a better citizen, but a different kind of person, one who shared socialist values, actively participated in state affairs, and understood the world through the lens of class consciousness (Porshneva, 2019, p. 71). Drawing on this conception of humankind and social reshaping, the CCP set out to construct new social examples (Farley & Johnson, 2021, p. 10), and it employed

the propaganda poster as the medium through which these exemplary figures were made visible and accessible to the broadest possible audience (Cheung, 2007, p. 9).

Visual Models' Functions

The use of visual models was particularly central to the poster's political function. In Mao Zedong's thought, the use of models was explicitly endorsed as the primary means of bringing about social and attitudinal change. Those who had already embraced the revolutionary ideals would serve as models for those still in the process of doing so, through this logic of emulation, society was to be transformed and the revolutionary values were to permeate every level of the social hierarchy (Landsberger, *Chinese Propaganda Posters: From Revolution to Modernization*, 2020, p. 26). In fact, role models were instruments of mass mobilization employed by the CCP. The practice included *dianxing shijian* 典型事件 (model incidents), *jiti dianxing* 集体典型 (collective models) and even *fumian dianxing* 负面典型 (negative models) (Liu Y. , 2023, p. 5). Following the establishment of the People's Republic, this principle was translated into the effort to create and disseminate *socialist heroes* whose lives and conduct serve as concrete templates for the population (Cheung, 2007, pp. 10-11). They were chosen to represent positive idealised figures carefully calibrated to communicate to specific segments of the population, telling them not only where they had to stand within the new socialist order, but also what the state expected of them (Welch, 2021, p. 32-33). The reader is referred to Liu Y. (2023) for a more detailed account of model cultivation in CCP propaganda.

Mao's consolidated social framework revolved around four key classes: the working class, the peasantry, the urban petit bourgeoisie, and the national bourgeoisie (Farley, Liu Hulan - 'A great life, a glorious death', 2021, p. 58). The models were drawn from each of these groups (Farley, Liu Hulan - 'A great life, a glorious death', 2021, p. 58). The individuals selected were chosen those who, more than other, had succeeded achieving a *fanshen* 翻身 (turnover), or more

specifically *fanxin* 翻心 (to turn over the heart-mind), a moral turnover (Cheung, 2007, p. 10), emerging as selfless, saintlike figures wholly devoted to the revolutionary cause. These figures served distinct functions. They established behavioural norms for the members of their respective target social class; they provided inspiration and transmitted the core values of the new state; and they offered idealised representations of recent historical events as interpreted by the Party (Farley, Liu Hulan - 'A great life, a glorious death', 2021, p. 58). This way, a gallery of heroic workers, selfless soldiers and radiant women, each functioning as a concrete embodiment of the revolutionary ideals, invited the viewer to recognise in them a model worth emulating (Landsberger, Chinese Propaganda Posters: From Revolution to Modernization, 2020, p. 26).

With regard to the concepts of *fanshen* and *fanxin*, it is worth noting that it embodied a cultural value that predated the revolution. It was a traditional expression with meanings connected to popular religion, which the revolution re-shaped in its process. The study carried by Li F. (2023) provides an account of the term's origins and its revolutionary reappropriation:

It [*fanshen*] refers to the process by which peasants participate in rural class struggle and receive the 'fruits of the struggle' in the form of land, houses and 'floating wealth', i.e. it is mainly connected with the economic interests of the peasantry. [...]. In his view, *fanshen* 'meant entering a new world' for hundreds of millions of landless or land-poor peasants in China. [...]. The idea was to find ways to bring about a transformational change in the minds of those who had undergone *fanshen* or were about to do so; what was called 'in suffering lies justice 苦就是理'. (p. 2)

In the context of revolution, the term designates the process by which peasants participated actively in rural class struggle and gained access to land, houses and material resources. Yet its significance extended beyond the economic dimension. As Li F. (2023) notes:

[...] the Chinese Communist Party under his leadership greatly emphasized ‘*fanxin*’, ‘thought reform’, and ‘making the revolution in the depths of the soul’. [...]. Unlike ‘*fanshen*’, ‘*fanxin*’ is a term that was probably created in the process of the Chinese revolution. The *shen* [body]/*xin* [heart-mind] pairing is a basic category in Chinese philosophy. Thought mobilization slogans during land reform, like ‘only by fully turning over in the *xin* can one fully turn over in the *shen*’, were in fact allowing the logic of traditional Chinese thought according to which ‘the *xin* is the master of the *shen*’. (p. 2)

the CCP under Mao’s leadership placed great emphasis on *fanxin*, literally making the revolution on the mind, consistently employing it in connection with “thought reform” and “making revolution in the depths of the soul”. *Fanshen* alone was not enough, *fanxin* was equally necessary. The citizen needed to internalize the new revolutionary values and cease to think and feel accordingly to the categories of the old order. In this sense, *fanxin* is intimately connected to the broader concept of thought reform that runs throughout the whole story of the CCP. The revolution would not have been completed until it had transformed people’s consciousness from within.

Aesthetic of the Posters

One of the most striking features of the Maoist poster system was its deliberate embrace of aesthetic and generic diversity as a strategy of mass inclusion. Rather than imposing a single aesthetic mode, the propaganda apparatus drew on an exceptionally wide range of cultural forms such as Beijing opera, peasant painting, oil painting, woodblock prints, selecting genres that resonated with different segments of the population, and ensuring that every cultural taste found some point of entry into the revolutionary visual landscape (Mittler, 2008, p. 478). As Mittler (2008) observes, the messages and contents of propaganda were negotiated between those who

created it and those who received it, and the recipients did not have to be forced to participate in these negotiations; they did so willingly, because the propaganda served many of their own cultural needs and desires (pp. 482–483). In this sense, Chinese propaganda art was political, manipulative, and teleological but, above all, popular (Mittler, 2008, p. 469).

Subconscious Communication

A particularly revealing observation about the reception of Maoist posters is made by Hilbertova (2012). She notes that, at that time, many people appreciated the posters simply for their colourful composition and visual content, without paying close attention to the slogans printed beneath, with the result that political messages were delivered in a subconscious way (Hilbertova, 2012, p. 182-184). This, she observes, is the same mechanism through which advertising works today (Hilbertova, 2012, p. 182). The poster did not require its viewer to be a conscious or willing political subject. Rather, it operated below deliberate attention, embedding itself in the visual environment and influencing future thinking and decision-making through sheer ubiquity and aesthetic appeal (Hilbertova, 2012, p. 182). Moreover, posters also had a feature that worked to their advantage from the perspective of propaganda. They were produced cheaply and easily, making them widely available. This let them spread much more easily; they could be seen in offices, factories, schools, private homes, and dormitories, and their bright colours caught the eye even in the most distracted or indifferent viewer (Hilbertova, 2012, p. 182). This subconscious penetration allowed the poster not only to reach those who could not be reached by the written word (Pan, 2014, p. 290); but to do so through the non-discursive, affective channels of colour, image and beauty.

Emotional Mobilisation

Beyond their subconscious effects, propaganda posters operated through the deliberate activation of specific emotional states. The perspective proposed by Egea Medrano, Garrido

Rubia, and Rojo Martinez (2021) on the emotional mechanisms of visual propaganda complements the discussion of emotion as a political instrument (see *Pathosformeln* paragraph above). Drawing on a substantial body of psychological research, they identify the emotions most consequential for political behaviour: enthusiasm, fear, and anger. These are described as the foundation of the two emotional systems that regulate individuals' political conduct, i.e. the disposition and surveillance system (Egea Medrano, Garrido Rubia, & Rojo Martinez, 2021, p. 224). Of these, enthusiasm and hope are particularly relevant to the visual register of Maoist poster propaganda, which was characterised above all by an iconography of positive affect: smiling faces, collective effort, radiant children, and the ever-present sun on the horizon. As Egea Medrano, Garrido Rubia, and Rojo Martinez (2021) observe, political imagery related to childhood or youth is particularly effective in reinforcing emotional narratives of hope and joy, precisely because it facilitates prospective thinking (Egea Medrano, Garrido Rubia, & Rojo Martinez, 2021, p. 225).

The iconographic elements characteristic of positive political campaigns, namely the smile, the gaze towards the horizon, symbolic elements such as the sun, the heart, or the rainbow carry a semiotic coherence rooted in the collective imaginary, contrasting implicitly with the retreat of the past and the fear associated with the old order conduct (Egea Medrano, Garrido Rubia, & Rojo Martinez, 2021, pp. 225-226). Such symbols are embedded in the collective imaginary and function by positioning the other, a dark past, as the implicit foil against which the positive image acquires its full emotional charge. In the Maoist context, this *other* was the feudal and imperialist order of the past that the revolution claimed to have overcome and the brightness of the new socialist world was inseparable from the darkness it had left behind. These visual conventions were systematically deployed to link the revolutionary present to a utopian future, producing in their viewers the emotional disposition of enthusiasm, hope, pride that Liu

Y. (2010) has identified as the affective core of the emancipation pattern of mobilisation (see Chapter 1.3 above).

Behavioural Change and the Construction of the Revolutionary Subject

Posters were produced to disseminate an explicit ideological message, designed to encourage revolutionary behaviour in their spectators (Evans, 2011, p. 6). This encouraging function operated through the mechanisms of emulation and identification that Landsberger (2020) has described. By presenting *quanguoxing dianxing* 全国性典型 (national models) (Liu Y., 2023, p. 6) of heroic and revolutionary conduct in vivid and accessible visual form, the poster invited viewers to recognise themselves in the image or, more precisely, to aspire to become the subject the image depicted (Landsberger S. R., 2020, p. 27). The figures depicted in the posters were not remote or idealized, they were ordinary citizens engaged in everyday activities, the kind of subjects with whom the viewer could readily identify. By populating the poster with recognizable figures, the CCP constructed a socialist Homeworld into which the viewers were invited to place themselves. In doing so, the posters fostered a sense of belonging and shared identity, rendering the values promoted by the Party and the revolutionary project as familiar. This process of identification was reinforced by the poster's integration into the broader emotional grammar of the Maoist propaganda system. Patterns of victimisation, redemption, and emancipation were communicated through image: the suffering victim, the reformed sinner, the heroic worker gazing towards the communist horizon. These were visual figures before they were rhetorical ones, and their power derived precisely from their capacity to engage the emotions directly, bypassing the deliberative filters that written argument must negotiate. It is in this sense that Maoist propaganda art was political and manipulative, and that its manipulation operated not through coercion but through the willing, affectively engaged participation of its audience (Mittler, 2008, p. 469). The manipulative power resides in its instrumental use of culturally

familiar content. Elements drawn from everyday life, shared cultural experience and even commonly-shared known historical events were used to serve precise propagandistic ends. It resulted that what was depicted was not completely the reality as it actually was, but a verisimilar version of it, constructed to feel credible and to build a “new sense of cultural belonging and historical continuity” (Ranta, 2020, p. 6).

What this analysis allows us to understand is how, through a variety of conscious and subconscious techniques, the Party sought to construct a new society grounded in clearly defined values aligned with its ideological agenda. Posters were employed as an educational tool. Thanks to their clarity, legibility, and immediate emotional impact, in line with studies of political iconography, these images were used to influence and intervene in the everyday reality of Chinese citizens. In this way, the Party aimed to create a Homeworld in which citizens could, or were expected to, identify themselves. The visual aesthetic relied on forms already familiar to the Chinese population, widely disseminated due to the ease of production and the strategic placement of posters in spaces of everyday life. This facilitated the creation of *propagemes*, whereby propagandistic content was circulated so extensively and efficiently that it transcended generational boundaries and continuously influenced the subconscious of society. At the same time, positive emotions of joy and enthusiasm, evoked by depictions of a promising future and reinforced by the visually appealing aesthetic, operated on an emotional level (*pathosformeln*). Finally, the role models presented in the posters encouraged citizens to identify with the figures depicted, helping to establish a *Homeworld* in which desirable values were explicitly clear, and immediately recognizable to all segments of the population.

Chapter 2: Women in Maoist China

2.1. Historical Subordination of Women

In 1950, the Marriage Law passed with the intent to cause a radical change in the Chinese families. The law explicitly assumed the mission of *fei jiu li xin* 废旧立新 (breaking the old and establishing the new), with the primary purpose of destroying all former patterns of feudal marriage and building a neo-democratic marriage and family relationships on the basis of the CCP's values and ethics (Pan F., 2019, p. 62; Engel, 1984, p. 955). It was grounded on CCP's core principles of class equality and collective emancipation, Mao himself described it as: "the fundamental law whose universality is second only to the Constitution" (Guo, 2024, p. 2). The following paragraphs will provide the core concepts to understand what the CCP aimed to reshape or abolish. This analysis will also outline the key elements of the moral order of the Confucian patriarchal system that structured the Chinese family and the early attempts at emancipation prior to the CCP's Marriage Law. However, when speaking of Confucian patriarchy, is to refer to a vast and internally diverse system of norms and values, which evolved considerably over time, across regions and between rural and elitist familial contexts, so that providing a comprehensive account would be almost impractical. For this reason, the discussion of pre-revolutionary context will focus primarily on familial practices and normative frameworks characteristic of the late Qing period, which constitute the most relevant historical background to the twentieth century reforms. Subsequently, consideration will also be given to the early reform initiatives of the Republican era, with reference to the Civil Code of 1931, in order to provide as comprehensive a background as possible before addressing the emancipatory reforms introduced by the CCP. Within this framework, this section outlines the key features that the 1950 Marriage Law sought to dismantle. These include the subordinate position of women within

the family hierarchy, the understanding of marriage as a contract between families rather than a union between individuals, and the existence of structured practices of marital exchange, also known as “marriage market.”

The intents of the reformation and gender emancipation carried by the CCP, together with the political and propagandistic campaign that accompanied it, should not be understood as a sharp rupture with the past, but rather as part of a more complex and integrated development. It formed a continuation of a process of social transformation already underway during the previous decades. In particular, CCP’s attempts at legal emancipation built upon the legislative efforts concerning the family and gender roles started by the KMT, incorporating evolving social perceptions and understanding of these roles that it had developed independently during the same period. Therefore, this Chapter also briefly examines earlier reform efforts undertaken by the KMT, particularly through the Civil Code of 1929-1930. This discussion is necessary in order to identify the legal and conceptual starting points from which the subsequent Marriage Law developed. Special attention will be given to those aspects of the KMT-era reforms that, despite their formal legal articulation, produced very few substantial social transformation; thereby, highlighting the conditions that made further socio-legal intervention both possible and, in the eyes of Communist policymakers, necessary. For a more thorough treatment of the socio-legal condition of Chinese women across the second half of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, the reader is referred to D’Attoma (2022) and Huang (2021).

Confucian Patriarchy and the Family Order

Family relationships in pre-revolutionary China were shaped for over two thousand years by what is commonly described as the “feudal marriage” system (Guo, 2024, p. 3). This comprehended customary practices, legal norms and ethical prescriptions articulated in Confucian discourse and inherited by centuries of feudal dynastic rule (Walstedt, 1978, p. 380).

In classical Confucian thought, social and familial relations were conceptualised in terms of a structured moral order, in which individuals were expected to occupy defined roles and fulfil corresponding obligations (Engel, 1984, p. 955). As documented by Tian (2025), in the *xiaojing* 孝經 (Classic of Filial Piety), adherence to those roles was understood as essential to maintaining the moral order of human society and of the entire cosmos (Tian, 2025, p. 8). The same conception finds more primordial expression in the *Yijing* 易经 (Book of Changes), as cited in Tian (2025):

The essence of *Qian* [乾] determines the hard side of things, and the essence of *Kun* [坤] determines the soft side of things. The masculinity of *Qian* and the Femininity of *Kun* determine the generation and development of all things. (p. 8)

The masculine principle and the feminine principle are complementary yet asymmetrical forces, the former associated with activity and primacy, the latter with passivity and receptivity. The social subordination of women, thus appeared as a reflection of the fundamental universal order. Within this framework, the organisation of the family was regarded as a key site for the transmission and enforcement of social values (Engel, 1984, p. 955). This normative model emphasised hierarchical relations structured along both generational and gendered lines, privileging seniority and male authority. The concepts of *nan zun nü bei* 男尊女卑 (male superiority and female inferiority) and *nü zi wu cai bian shi de* 女子無才便是德 (an ignorant woman is virtuous) well encapsulate the patriarchal conception of the family (Pan F. , 2019, p. 65). Women were situated in subordinated positions within this hierarchy and were expected to remain obedient with virtue defined in terms of submission (Walstedt, 1978, p. 380). Such patterns of subordination were not only socially reproduced but also reflected in legal frameworks and institutional practices.

Da Qing Lüli Examples

Below are presented selected legislative examples drawn from the *Da Qing lüli* 大清律例 (*Laws and Precedents of the Great Qing*), the legal code of the Qing dynasty, which illustrate prevailing socio-political conceptions of women. Statute 1.15 establishes that “women who commit adultery, theft, or unfilial conduct are to be punished according to the relevant statutes” (Da Qing lüli, 1910/1999, p. 2, author’s translation). For other offenses women were permitted to redeem their punishment by payment, including beating with the bamboo or staff, penal servitude, exile, or miscellaneous capital offenses. Statute 1.14 applies the same principle specifically to adultery, stipulating that “women convicted of this offense are subject to cangue punishment but may similarly redeem it by payment” (Da Qing lüli, 1910/1999, p. 2, author’s translation). The possibility of redemption through payment was not a form of leniency extended equally across the population, but a gender-specific provision that presupposed the existence of gender-specific punishments in the first place based on some specific moral conduct norms. Crucially, no equivalent statutes applied to men committing comparable offenses. This gendered legal logic is further evidenced by the treatment of unfilial conduct. Statute 2.00, which enumerates the *shi e* 十惡 (ten abominations), lists as its seventh category *buxiao* 不孝 (unfilial conduct) defined as, among other things, “accusing or verbally abusing one’s paternal grandparents, parents, or one’s husband’s grandparents and parents”; violations of this obligation, including cursing or insulting one’s parents-in-law, constituted a serious offense that could carry the death penalty (Da Qing lüli, 1910/1999, p. 3, author’s translation). The deliberate inclusion of the husband’s family as a category of protected persons reveals the extent to which the law encoded the wife’s subordination to her marital household as a moral and legal obligation. The concept invoked here is *xiao* 孝 (filial piety), the Confucian principle of filial piety. The value of *xiao* can be understood in relation to one of the fundamental relational frameworks identified

within Confucian thought, i.e., the husband–wife relationship. The obligations of family members were not uniform, rather, the family is conceived as an inherently unequal institution in which roles and responsibilities are clearly and hierarchically defined (Higgins, 2013, p. 24). The subject positions of son, wife, younger brother etc. entail the requirement of deference toward their respective superiors. In the case of the conjugal relationship, this principle translates into the expectation that the wife shows deference to her husband. For a more detailed discussion of the concept of *xiao*, the reader is referred to Higgins (2013).

Another illustration of the law’s gendered structure is Statute 285, which concerns the killing of an adulterer. The statute stipulates that “in cases of adultery, the woman is to be transferred to the authorities and married off or sold, with her price confiscated” (Da Qing lüli, 1910/1999, p. 154, author’s translation). Furthermore, “if a wife or concubine conspires with her lover to kill her husband, she is to be punished by death by slow slicing” (Da Qing lüli, 1910/1999, p. 254, author’s translation). Notably, the statute further provides that if “the adulterous woman was unaware of her lover’s intent to kill her husband, she is nonetheless to be punished by strangulation” (Da Qing lüli, 1910/1999, p. 254, author’s translation). What is analytically significant here is not the punishment of homicide as such, which is a feature of legal systems across historical contexts, but the specific moral logic underlying the statute. The severity of the punishment is directed not at the act of killing *per se*, but at the woman’s adulterous conduct, which is treated as the primary moral transgression. The wife’s sexual infidelity is the central offense, warranting distinct and explicitly gendered penalties. No equivalent statute appears to be applied to husbands who committed comparable acts against their wives. Finally, Statute 12 reveals a further dimension of women’s legal condition, the extent to which their social rank and legal standing were entirely derivative of male authority. The statute establishes that “a woman’s official rank is determined by that of her husband, or, in the event of his death, by that of her son,

provided she remains chaste and does not remarry” (Da Qing lüli, 1910/1999, p. 6, author’s translation). This means that a woman possessed no independent legal standing of her own, but existed within the legal order only as a relational figure, defined by her position relative to a man.

Women’s Position Within the Family

Until the recognition of women as autonomous legal agents, marked by the introduction of the KMT Civil Code of 1931 and the subsequent Marriage Law in 1950 (Huang, 2021, p. 3), young women were frequently treated as commodities in transit from the authority of their natal family to that of their husband (Hershatter, 2004, p. 997). While this condition should not be overgeneralised, given the considerable variation across regions and social classes, it was nonetheless a widespread phenomenon that affected a large number of young women, particularly in rural contexts (Watson, 1986, as cited in Hershatter, 2004, p. 997). From birth, the arrival of a daughter tended to be received with sorrow within the family. Perceived as temporary members of the natal household, women at the moment of marriage “literally lost their childhood names and were known henceforth mainly by kinship terms, denying them the full personhood attainable by men” (Watson, 1986, as cited in Hershatter, 2004, p. 997). This transfer not only severed a woman’s ties to her family of origin but also represented a concrete loss of labour for one household to the benefit of another (Walstedt, 1978, p. 380). In the poorest contexts, young women were reduced to instruments of quasi-economic exchange, subordinating their person to the interest of the family. They were sold by their parents, husbands, or parents-in-law to brokers as market commodities, or forced into arranged marriages designed to generate the financial resources needed to fund a brother’s own wedding (Walstedt, 1978, p. 380; Engel, 1984, p. 956). Escaping these conditions was not only culturally prohibited by the rigid moral norms of the Confucian order, but also it was nearly impossible on the legal plane as well. Under the Qing law, the only forms of legal protection available were the so-called *san buqu* 三不去 (three limitations)

and the divorce, which was limited to the case of mutual consent between spouses, established by Statute 116. Under these provisions, a husband was prohibited from expelling his wife in three specific circumstances: if she had observed three years of mourning for his parents, if she had no natal home to return to, and if the family's economic status had risen since the marriage (*Da Qing lüli*, 1910/1999, p. 59); while the divorce clause stated: "if husband and wife do not live in harmony and both wish to separate, they shall not be punishable by law" (*Da Qing lüli*, 1910/1999, p. 59, author's translation). These protections were, as we can see, extremely limited in scope, confined to a handful of specific circumstances, or, in the case of mutual consent divorce, contingent on the agreement of both parties. In situations where a woman sought to escape her condition unilaterally, the law offered her no recourse. Beyond these few exceptions, many women found themselves with no legal means of escape. For those trapped in conditions of extreme subordination, suicide remained, in practice, the only way out (Walstedt, 1978, p. 380). Even when the KMT Civil Code of 1931 introduced further forms of formal legal protection, the socio-cultural reality changed only marginally. This analysis will return to this in section 2.1b below.

Marriage as a Contract Between Families

Until the reforms brought by the Republican era and the Communist New Marriage Law, traditional marriage in pre-revolutionary China was not a contract between individuals but an arrangement between families, governed by collective needs and values rather than personal attraction or emotional attachment. Love between bride and groom was considered not only unnecessary but potentially disruptive to family stability, and deliberate precautions were taken to prevent emotional involvement from interfering with the arrangement (Engel, 1984, p. 956). The practical mechanics of marriage reflected this logic. Arrangements involved the negotiation of a bride price, i.e., gifts paid by the groom's family to the bride, and a dowry of furniture which

comprehended clothing and jewellery provided by the bride's family (Engel, 1984, p. 956). Concubinage was an accepted and relatively common practice among the upper classes as a means of expanding the family, further entrenching the subordination of women within the household hierarchy (Engel, 1984, p. 956). Another common practice was that of *tongyangxi* 童养媳 (child brides raised by the future husband's family) (D'Attoma, 2022, p. 12), the practice of adopting a girl to serve as a future daughter-in-law and wife for an infant son, but also as a servant or a prostitute (Van Ijzendoorn & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2024, p. 175; Johnson, Huang & Wang, 1998, p. 485). This vividly reveals the cultural environment in which girls grew up, especially during childhood. Taken into the household of their future husband at an early age, they were effectively assigned a marital destiny over which they had neither choice nor meaningful awareness. At the same time, being raised by their future in-laws, placed them in a position where the upbringing could be shaped, allowing the household to mould them into a daughter-in-law who conformed to its own expectations and preferences. Women were, in effect, reduced to the status of transferrable assets, treated as a form of property assigned a monetary value and exchanged between families for economic gain.

The subordination of women was codified in Qing law with clarity. Statute 116 declared that a husband could expel his wife on seven grounds, the so-called *qichu* 七出 (seven reasons for expelling a wife), which were: barrenness, wanton conduct, neglect of his parents, loquacity, theft, jealousy, and chronic illness; at the same time, the wife's only legal protection consisted in the previously mentioned *san buqu* 三不去 (three limitations): having observed mourning for her parents-in-law, having shared adversity with her husband, or having no natal family to return to (Huang P. C., 2021, p. 12). A wife could not divorce her husband unless her husband consented as well. Even in the case where a minimal degree of female agency might appear to be present, the terminology itself reveals the limits of such autonomy. The Qing code contained no term to

express a marital dissolution in which the active agency rested with the woman, the nearest equivalent was *liyi* 离异 (dissolution), but it designated an act performed by the magistrate, not the wife (Huang P. C., 2021, p. 12). This linguistic and procedural framework suggests that women's capacity to act independently within a marriage was significantly constrained within a legal conception subordinated to male authority.

2.1b. Early Reform Attempts: The Guomintang Period

Having outlined the principal features of women subordination within the pre-revolutionary family system, it is important to note that these practices did not remain completely static until the CCP's intervention. Rather than a sharp rupture, the reforms introduced by the Communist government were part of a longer and more gradual process of transformation. During the Republican era, the *Guomintang* government had already begun to take the first step towards gender equality. The following section, therefore, briefly examines the principal legal developments of the early twentieth century. The purpose of this section is not to provide a detailed account of women's condition under *Guomintang* rule; rather, it will highlight how, despite their formal articulation, the KMT's reform remained largely confined to urban centres and failed to produce substantial social change in rural contexts, thereby revealing the structural limits that the CCP's Marriage Law and propaganda campaign would seek to address. It is important to clarify that the CCP's family reforms did not simply follow and build upon the Guomintang's earlier legislation as a linear progression. Rather, the two processes developed almost in parallel, shaped by distinct ideological frameworks and directed at different social constituencies. The CCP had been systematically developing its own approach to women's emancipation since at least 1927, institutionalising it within Soviet areas from 1931 onwards, following a trajectory that unfolded independently of, and often in direct opposition to, Nationalist policy.

The Family Book

Following the proclamation of the Republic of China in 1911, urban intellectuals began pressing for a reform of the traditional family system along the principles of spousal equality and freedom of marriage. These ideas were eventually codified after the KMT came to power in 1928, culminating in the Civil Code of 1929–30 and its 1931 Family Book, which drew inspiration

from contemporary European civil codes (D'Attoma, 2022, pp. 10–11). In contrast to the Qing code, the new legislation formally rejected hierarchical relations in favour of the equality of all citizens before the law. As a legal subject, a woman now possessed the same rights and obligations as a man. Women were permitted more freedom, to ask for divorce, remarry, inherit property (Botton Beja & Cornejo Bustamante, 1992, p. 103) and the right to choose their own marriage partner (Huang P. C., 2021, p. 27). Marriage was to be concluded directly by the parties themselves, no longer by their families, once they reached legal age, and was required to be celebrated in a public ceremony in the presence of at least two witnesses (D'Attoma, 2022, pp. 10-11). For the first time, the right to seek divorce was extended to both spouses on an equal basis, though the 1931 code limited this right to specific grounds enumerated by law, *lienu zhuyi* 列举主义 (Art. 1050), a restriction that would later be relaxed under the Maoist system (D'Attoma, 2022, pp. 25-26). However, it is necessary to clarify that the practical reach of these reforms was extremely limited. As the research developed by Botton Beja and Cornejo Bustamante (1992) shows, the KMT's most serious attempt to introduce changes in family relations had little diffusion and its application remained confined to a small number of urban sectors (Botton Beja & Cornejo Bustamante, 1992, p. 103). This observation is further reinforced by D'Attoma (2022), who explains that rural clan structures, which constituted the social fabric within which the majority of the Chinese population lived, remained largely untouched, rendering the new legislation effectively inapplicable beyond urban centres (D'Attoma, 2022, pp. 10–11).

More significantly, the KMT's relationship with women's emancipation was deeply ambivalent. The violent rupture with the CCP in 1927 and the subsequent White Terror, i.e., the violent anti-communist purge against all suspected communist sympathisers, targeted women's organisations and politically active women indiscriminately. Over a thousand women leaders

were killed that year, many of them not communists but simply active participants in the women's movement (Edwards, 2000, pp. 118–119). The New Life Movement launched in 1934 under Chiang Kai-shek represents a further step in this direction. Blending Confucian and Christian moralism, the campaign promoted a return to traditional feminine virtues, casting the modern woman as a figure of frivolous hedonism and consumerism to be replaced by the image of the devoted mother and companion (Edwards, 2000, pp. 119-120). Rather than advancing, the gender reforms formally codified until that time. The Movement effectively reversed the cultural trajectory that had accompanied them, subordinating questions of women's political participation to a conservative moral agenda. The modern woman's political ambitions, which had already been violently suppressed, were now further silenced through a discourse of puritanical domesticity that reduced femininity to the role of devoted mother and loyal companion to the nation (Edwards, 2000, pp. 119-120). In the spring of 1941, the KMT had convened a conference of women activists at which women's participation in politics was explicitly condemned (Botton Beja & Cornejo Bustamante, 1992, p. 103). In 1949 additional measures concerning women were introduced, including the issuance of a proclamation against the employment of married women and the suppression of rural educational programs previously organized by the Young Women's Association (Botton Beja & Cornejo Bustamante, 1992, p. 103). A further paradox lay at the heart of KMT legal reform. By granting women the status of autonomous legal agents, the new code offered them less protection than the Qing system in certain circumstances, particularly in cases of abduction, where the law assumed women were capable of controlling their own fate (Huang P. C., 2021, p. 48). Under the new legal framework, state protection was guaranteed only where physical force could be demonstrated. In absence of evidence of violence, the law tended to presume that a woman had left of her own volition (Huang P. C., 2021, p. 27). Consequently, women who had been manipulated, coerced into leaving without overt physical compulsion

found themselves in the grey area. Formal equality, in other words, did not translate into effective protection in a society, whose material and cultural conditions had not yet fundamentally changed.

Despite the early attempts at reform, at the founding of the PRC, feudal marriage and family system remained largely prevalent. Arranged marriage, adoptive daughters-in law, concubinage and similar customs still existed, therefore the need to eliminate all this was still urgent (Guo, 2024, p. 3). It was against this backdrop of formal legal progress undercut by political repression, rural immobility, and ideological conservatism that the CCP's approach to women's emancipation took shape. Unlike the KMT, which framed women primarily as legal individuals, the CCP embedded women's liberation within a broader revolutionary project, positioning women not merely as free subjects but as active participants in the construction of the socialist state (Kristeva & Conroy Kennedy, 1975, p. 61; Tsai, 1996, p. 500). It is this re-conceptualisation, and its concrete legal expression in the Marriage Law of 1950 that the following section will examine.

2.2. The Marriage Law of 1950

Historical Background and Legislative Context

The Marriage Law was proclaimed on May 1, 1950 by the Central People's Government Council. The law did not emerge in a political vacuum, its theoretical foundations had been laid more than two decades earlier, when the CCP began to systematically link women's emancipation to the broader revolutionary struggle. For communists, the unequal treatment of women was fully recognized as one of the many forms in which human inequality manifested itself, comparable to class inequality (Qian, 2024, p. 1). However, that of women was not a category encompassing all the women of China, but was mainly reserved for a designated group of women from certain classes. These included peasants, workers or the proletariat women: those classes who had experienced class oppression and were thus potential revolutionaries (Huang X. , 2018, p. 67). In his 1927 *Hunan nongmin yundong kaocha baogao* 湖南农民运动考察报告 (Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan), Mao Zedong identified the authority of the husband as a specifically gendered layer of domination borne by peasant women in addition to the political, clan, and religious authorities that already subjugated men; this made women the most oppressed group within the traditional social order and positioned their liberation as inseparable from the revolutionary project (Wang L. , 2019, p. 318). The following year, the Sixth CCP Congress passed a resolution recognising peasant women as the most active revolutionary force and calling for their systematic recruitment into peasant organisations, thereby establishing women's liberation as a core component of communist strategy (Wang L. , 2019, p. 318). This institutional momentum accelerated with the establishment of the Jiangxi-Fujian Soviet Republic in 1931, within which women's emancipation was formally integrated into the revolutionary programme. Specialised women's departments, local women's congresses, literacy programmes, and leadership training courses were created, aimed at dismantling

gendered divisions of labour and enabling women's direct participation in political and economic life (Wang L. , 2019, p. 319).

Key Provisions of the Law

Article 1 of the Marriage Law of the People's Republic of China (1950) announced the law's foundational principle in unambiguous terms:

The arbitrary and compulsory feudal marriage system, which is based on the superiority of man over woman and which ignores the children's interests shall be abolished. The New Democratic marriage system, which is based on free choice of partners, on monogamy, on equal rights for both sexes and on protection of the lawful interests of women and children, shall be put into effect. (pp. 1-2)

This opening declaration signalled the legal dismantling of the patriarchal family structure analysed in the preceding section, targeting specifically the practices of arranged marriage, concubinage, child betrothal, polygamy, and the subordination of women within the household. The law prohibited child betrothal and established minimum marriage ages of twenty years for men and eighteen for women (Engel, 1984, p. 958). State registration was made compulsory for all marriages, enabling the government to exclude arranged, commercial, underage, and bigamous unions while also introducing political criteria into the selection of marital partners. Prospective couples' class backgrounds and political loyalties were scrutinised, privileging good class unions and discouraging those involving politically suspect individuals (Diamant, 2001, p. 450-451). This represents a radical departure from both Qing and Nationalist practice, replacing wealth and status-based marital hierarchies with a politically inflected framework. The term "feudal marriage" requires clarification, as it constitutes a politically constructed category deployed by the CCP with a delegitimising intent. Pre-revolutionary practices deemed morally incompatible with the new socialistic order from an ideological point

of view. As employed in Party discourse, the term functioned as an ideological umbrella term to designate a wide range of institutions and customs which require reformation or abolition. Within the familial sphere, this referred to the traditions of the extended family, footbinding, polygamy, concubinage, and so forth (Tsai, 1996, p. 501), which were selectively grouped as elements of a past to be abolished. This categorization operated thus as a tool of cultural homogenisation, flattening practices that were historically diverse into a single negative formation. This implicitly arrogated the Party the authority to determine which cultural forms were compatible with socialist modernity and which were not.

The law also introduced important provisions governing the internal structure of the family. Article 8 framed the family not as an autonomous patriarchal unit but as a cell of the socialist community, within which spouses were obliged to love, respect, and support one another, engage in productive work, and collaborate in the construction of a new society (People's Republic of China, 1950, p. 4). Article 10 established that a woman's domestic labour was equivalent to a man's labour outside the home, granting her equal rights over family property; this was a provision that, in the context of the abolition of private property, effectively recognised housework as socially productive labour and provided women with a material basis for autonomy (People's Republic of China, 1950, p. 4). Article 11 allowed women to retain their maiden names, and later decisions extended this to children's right to take the mother's surname (People's Republic of China, 1950, p. 4). This was a symbolic rupture with patrilineal descent that, as Kristeva and Conroy Kennedy (1975) observe, elevated women on the plane of social recognition and power (Kristeva & Conroy Kennedy, 1975, p. 59-60). Equally significant was the law's treatment of divorce. Both spouses were granted equal rights to file for divorce (D'Attoma, 2022, pp. 25-26). It was to be registered with district authorities, and in cases where custody was granted to the mother, the father was held responsible for all or part of the costs of the children's

maintenance and education (Kristeva & Conroy Kennedy, 1975, p. 63). These provisions mark a shift in the conception of marriage and parenthood, from a legal point of view at least. Both spouses stand equal before the law, not only in their right to dissolve their union, but also in their responsibilities towards the children. Childcare was no longer an exclusively feminine duty. By holding the father financially accountable for the maintenance and education of his children even after the divorce, the law recast parental responsibility as a shared obligation, independent of gender.

Social Objectives and their Implementation

The Marriage Law's objectives extended well beyond the regulation of matrimonial relations. The CCP identified two principal aims: the dismantling of the feudal family system and the active promotion of women's social responsibilities as citizens and productive workers (Kristeva & Conroy Kennedy, 1975, p. 58). To these was added a third target, what the Party termed "bourgeois morality" i.e., an encompassing category designating all conducts deemed threatening to family stability and incompatible with the new socialist ethics, including adultery, prostitution, and various abuses of economic and social power (Kristeva & Conroy Kennedy, 1975, p. 58). Like feudal marriage, "bourgeois morality" functioned as a residual category and served an analogous political purpose, namely that of defining the boundaries of acceptable conduct. The construction of the moral order therefore encompasses, on one hand, feudal marriage as archaic practices to be overcome in the name of revolutionary progress, and on the other, bourgeois morality, which condemns the capitalist tendencies of the present, behaviours belonging to a social order that the revolution aims to dismantle. All of this is consequently condemned as a symptom of false class consciousness. Those who engage in such practices demonstrate that they remain bound to the individualistic and mercantile logic of the bourgeois past, rather than embodying the collective values of socialism. Moral failing is therefore also

political failing, which renders this categorisation a powerful instrument of control, as it transforms private deviance into a public betrayal of revolutionary values.

Women's integration into economic life was, from the outset, both an ideological imperative and a pragmatic one. The CCP held that women's employment was a prerequisite for genuine emancipation from the patriarchal family structures that had long defined and constrained their existence, and that the full participation of women was essential to the economic construction and rural development at the core of the Party's consolidation strategy (Tsai, 1996, p. 500). Over the following decades, the government actively encouraged women to enter professions traditionally reserved for men, e.g., tractor driving, airline piloting, electrical work, and engineering (as will be shown in the next Chapter), and made literacy classes, primary schooling, and university education freely available (Tao, 1996, p. 351).

The law's implementation was closely coordinated with the land reform campaign of the early 1950s. The two campaigns should be understood as interconnected links in the broader chain of national reconstruction, since both targeted feudal institutions. Land reform campaign addressed the material basis of the extended family, while the Marriage Law campaign attacked its most egregious abuses against women, especially foot binding, polygamy, concubinage, child brides, and dowry payments (Tsai, 1996, p. 501). The Party actively recruited rural female cadres and fostered the growth of women's organisations to enforce the new provisions at the local level, recognising that legislation alone was insufficient without concrete institutional support (Wang L. , 2019, p. 319). The results, assessed over the following decades, were substantial: paid employment became a standard feature of urban women's lives, and rough wage parity was maintained between men and women performing equivalent work (Hershatter, 2004, p. 1021).

Limitations and Resistance

Despite its ambitions, the Marriage Law encountered profound and, sometimes, violent resistance. In rural areas, the gap between legislative prescription and social reality proved particularly difficult to close. Male peasants threatened female cadres who attempted to enforce the new provisions, and mothers-in-law sought to preserve their authority over daughters-in-law within the traditional extended family structure (Tsai, 1996, p. 502). In some documented cases, women took their own lives in protest against the refusal of husbands and local male cadres to comply with the law, a grim reversal of the pattern described in the preceding section, in which suicide had represented the only escape from patriarchal subjugation (Tsai, 1996, p. 502). The scale of these difficulties was officially acknowledged in 1953, when the National Committee for Thorough Implementation reported that more than 75,000 deaths or suicides per year were attributable to marital disputes arising from the failed enforcement of the new provisions (Tsai, 1996, p. 502). These figures reveal the depth of the structural resistance the law faced and the degree to which traditional norms remained operative at the local level. A significant contributing factor was the absence of viable state alternatives to the welfare functions traditionally performed by the extended family, such as old-age security, childcare, and medical support, which made many women and families reluctant to abandon the structures the law sought to dismantle (Tsai, 1996, p. 502).

The limitations of the law's reach were also evident in the sphere of property. While land reform redistributed small plots equally among family members regardless of sex, in practice land allotted to women was effectively controlled by their husbands, and patriarchal familial relationships in the Confucian tradition seemed to remain largely intact at the level of daily life (Tsai, 1996, p. 501). Similarly, while formal wage parity was maintained in urban workplaces, a persistent gendered division of labour directed men into the higher-paying state sector and more

skilled, prestigious positions across economic sectors (Hershatter, 2004, p. 1021). Equally telling is what the law did not address. Same-sex relationships were entirely absent from its provisions and remained unmentioned in sources from the Mao years altogether (Hershatter, 2004, p. 1012). The law's conception of gender equality was, in this respect, strictly heteronormative and oriented toward the reorganisation of the conjugal family rather than a broader dismantling of sexual hierarchies. The socialist woman was to be emancipated from patriarchal subjugation, but within the framework of a monogamous, state-registered union directed toward the collective good.

Marriage Law as an Ideological Project

It would be reductive, however, to assess the Marriage Law solely through the lens of its enforcement difficulties. As the preceding analysis suggests, the law was not merely a legal instrument but a component of a broader cultural and ideological project aimed at producing a new kind of social subject: the socialist woman. The law theoretically favoured this figure not as a free individual in the liberal sense, but as an active element in the realm of both sexuality and productivity, whose emancipation was inseparable from her integration into the socialist collective (Kristeva & Conroy Kennedy, 1975, p. 61). This constructed figure of the new socialist woman was not only a legal category, but a cultural ideal, one that the Party's propaganda apparatus would work to render visible, desirable, and universally legible. It is this ideological construction, and the visual forms through which it was disseminated, that the following section will examine.

2.3. The New Maoist Woman

The Modern Woman Before Maoism and the CCP's Redefinition

Any analysis of the Maoist conception of the *new woman* must be situated within a longer intellectual history. The figure of the *xiandai funü* 现代妇女 (modern woman) had already been the subject of sustained and often contentious debate during the 1920s and 1930s, arguing what kind of women could be considered truly modern (Edwards, 2000, p. 115). The commercial modern woman visible in urban centres and associated with consumerism, glamour, and Western-inflected self-adornment, was not celebrated as a sign of progress but condemned as a fraudulent imitation. External markers of modernity, such as clothing, hairstyles, and shoe styles were consistently dismissed as superficial by the intellectual elite, who insisted that authentic modernity resided in inner qualities, above all in a woman's political consciousness and her commitment to the nation's welfare (Edwards, 2000, p. 115). Instead, were considered genuine modern those women whose education prompted concrete political action, who possessed knowledge of international affairs rather than international fashions, and whose independence led to political commitment rather than "fun-loving gallivanting" (Edwards, 2000, p. 123).

In the 1920s and 1930s, the emblematic figure of womanhood was associated with the consumer culture of Republican Shanghai, shaped by Western fashion and the rise of urban consumption (Zhou, 2022, pp. 622-623). She was represented as fashionable and cosmopolitan in the *yuefenpai* 月份牌 (calendar paintings), widely known commercial posters (Zhou, 2022, p. 621), and in illustrated magazines such as *Funü jiefang huabao* 妇女解放画报 (Emancipation Pictorial) (Zhou, 2022, p. 624). She was frequently depicted in elegant *qipao* 旗袍 to promote commercial products and to link the female image to liberation and modernity (Zhou, 2022, p. 624). For a more in-depth examination of the image of the commercial woman of the 1920s and

30s, the reader is referred to the study carried by Zhou (2022). It was against this figure that May Fourth intellectuals and urban reformist elites articulated an alternative conception of female modernity. As noted by Edwards (2000), the Chinese writer and historian Hu Shi 胡适 (1891-1962), in one of his writings, captured this distinction succinctly in his description of the authentic New Woman:

‘New Woman’ is a new word, and it designates a new kind of woman [*xin pai de funü* 新牌的妇女], who is extremely intense in her speech, who tends towards the extreme in her actions, who doesn’t believe in religion or adhere to rules of conduct [*lifa* 礼法], yet who is an extremely good thinker and has extremely high morals. Of course amongst them there are plenty of fake ‘new women.’ Their words don’t match their intentions: what they do is completely at odds with what they say. (Hu Shi, 1918, as cited in Edwards, 2000, p. 124)

The modern woman was not simply a social type but a contested ideological category, one that reformist intellectuals sought to define and police. Yet, their efforts ultimately proved insufficient. By the late 1930s, the commercial version of the modern woman had come to dominate public culture, with commercial power displacing the reformist intellectual’s claim to guardianship over female identity (Edwards, 2000, p. 116). It was in this context that the CCP intervened. Where the Republican intellectuals had attempted to define and guard the image of the modern woman, the CCP possessed the institutional apparatus to enforce its vision on a national scale. As we will see in the next paragraphs, the Party aimed to eliminate the commercial and glamorised version of female modernity, replacing it with an aesthetic and ideological model entirely subordinated to the goals of the socialist state. The pseudo-modern woman of urban consumer culture had no place in the new order; she was marginalized by the politically conscious, labouring, collectively oriented woman of the revolution. The CCP’s conception of

the new woman differed from that of the reformist intellectuals in a crucial respect: where the latter had sought to cultivate politically aware women as an educated vanguard, the CCP's model was explicitly rooted in the peasant and working-class majority. The new woman was not an urban intellectual but a rural labourer, a factory worker, a soldier, all figures drawn from the very social classes the regime had declared to be the foundation of the revolutionary state (Farley, 2021, p. 59).

Emancipation Through Labour and Active Participation

The cornerstone of the CCP's programme for female emancipation was the integration of women into the sphere of productive labour. Employment outside the domestic sphere was conceived as the prerequisite for liberation from the patriarchal structures of the traditional family. As Tsai (1996) outlines, the Party's approach operated on two simultaneous fronts. First, the 1949 Constitution of the People's Republic of China legally stipulated the equality of women as full citizens. As previously described in Chapter 2.2, the 1950 Marriage Law went further, prohibiting arranged marriages, denouncing patriarchal authority within the household, and granting both sexes equal rights to file for divorce. Second, and most prominently, women were to be integrated into economic development, with female employment understood as the essential condition for emancipation from bourgeois and feudal structures (Tsai, 1996, p. 500). The scope of this project was considerable. Women were actively encouraged to pursue professions that had been traditionally and exclusively associated with men. This included tractor driving, airline piloting, electrical work, and engineering (Tao, 1996, p. 351), occupations that, prior to this attempt of emancipation, would have been entirely outside the social horizon of most Chinese women. Chen (2003) shows that female model workers functioned in as everyday icons. They were simultaneously presented as the most progressive elements of the new society while also being interchangeable with the innumerable other model workers featured in the press on a daily

basis (Chen, 2003, p. 270). The term *nǚjie diyi* 女界第一 (female-kind first) referred to groups of women officially recognized as pioneers in traditionally male-dominated professions, such as tractor driving, train, welding etc. (Chen, 2003, p. 271). Commonly called *diyi* 第一 (the first) because of the vanguard position they occupied, these women were framed as standing at the forefront of China's new socialist feminism (Chen, 2003, p. 270). Cheung (2007) draws attention to the particular symbolic weight of the female tractor driver in this context. The tractor was not simply a piece of agricultural machinery but a symbol of socialist prosperity and rural progress; a woman operating it signified liberation from the shackles of the old feudal society and the promise of a better life under communist rule (Cheung, 2007, pp. 10–11). It is for this reason that such figures were prominently celebrated in propaganda materials. Chapter 4 of this analysis provides further visible examples of the concepts described above.

Women were not to be passive beneficiaries of socialist transformation but active and equal participants in its construction. This rhetoric of total inclusion was backed by concrete mobilisation. Women's participation was considered integral to the success of the land reform and marriage law campaigns of the early 1950s, and the Party actively recruited rural female cadres and promoted the proliferation of women's organisations (Tsai, 1996, p. 501). The scale of this mobilisation intensified further during the Great Leap Forward, when, as Tsai (1996) records, over 300 million women were mobilised into production brigades, and the demand for full-time female labour in the agricultural sector necessitated the creation of communal mess halls and nearly five million nurseries in rural areas by 1959 (Tsai, 1996, p. 504). The visual representation of this process was equally systematic. Wang (2010) argues that placing working women at the centre of socialist visual culture carried multiple ideological functions. It identified women with the project of state building, celebrated their contribution to socialist construction, and elevated the work they performed, however ordinary, to the status of a leading-class activity

(Wang Z. , 2010, p. 841). An exemplary case is that of *Zhongguo funü* 中国妇女 (Women of New China), one of the most important feminist magazines, affiliated with the *Quanguo minzhu funu lianhehui* 全国民主妇女联合会 (All-China Women's Democratic Federation) i.e., the official mass organisation for women of the CCP. During the 1950s, it consistently depicted women in roles previously associated exclusively with men: the first female locomotive operator, the first group of women pilots, a housewife-turned-bricklayer, a ship's captain, and others (Wang Z. , 2010, p. 841). These representations were meant to function as documentation of real change, as inspiration for women readers to move beyond the domestic sphere, and as instruments of a broader ideological project aimed at challenging entrenched sexism both within and outside the Party (Wang Z. , 2010, p. 841).

Alongside participation in production, women were also expected to engage in political education. Special courses were established to train female Party cadres in Marxist-Leninist theory and Maoist thought, and women's guidance teams were formed down to the level of the smallest village unit (Tsai, 1996, p. 506), and providing opportunities for formal education as well (Tao, 1996, p. 351). The energy of women was, in short, to be redirected from the *jia* 家 (private household) to the construction of the socialist nation. The liberation the Party offered was real, but conditional. Real, in that it expanded the economic and social horizons available to women, while simultaneously subordinating these horizons to the needs of the State. Whether this constitutes genuine emancipation or its instrumentalization remains one of the central interpretive questions in the historiography of Maoist gender politics.

The Aesthetics of the New Maoist Woman

The ideological project of female emancipation was inseparable from a specific visual and aesthetic programme. The new communist woman was expected to embody her political commitment not only through her actions but through her appearance. That appearance was to

be conspicuously stripped of anything that might evoke femininity in the traditional or commercial sense. The CCP's rejection of existing beauty norms was twofold. On one hand, it repudiated the traditional Chinese aesthetics associated with traditional femininity, of which foot binding was the most extreme expression. On the other, it rejected what it characterised as Westernised approaches to female self-adornment: cosmetics, jewellery, high-heeled shoes, and fashionable clothing were dismissed as bourgeois affectations or superficial trappings of a pseudo-modern femininity (Hilbertova, 2012, p. 194). Communist activists maintained that truly modern women should rebel against beauty norms and renounce self-beautification altogether (Hilbertova, 2012, p. 194). What replaced these norms was a deliberately unisex aesthetic. Women were encouraged to wear loose, shapeless clothing in the limited palette of cadre grey, army green, or worker-and-peasant blue; garments were explicitly designed not to reveal female bodily curves (Hilbertova, 2012, p. 194). Short hair, cropped or fashioned into simple pigtailed, became a marker of political identification and a visible break from traditional standards of feminine beauty (Landsberger S. R., 2011, p. 19). As Landsberger (2011) describes, the result was that "men and women alike had stereotypical, 'masculinized' bodies, which almost made them look like *superpersons* (Landsberger S. R., 2011, p. 19). Their clothes were baggy and sexless" and "their faces, including short-cropped hairdos and chopped-off pigtailed, were done according to a limited repertoire of acceptable standard forms" (Landsberger S. R., 2011, p. 19). Physical features as large arms and legs tirelessly engaged in labour were promoted (Chen, 2003, p. 273-274). In her study, Chen (2003) provides an extract retrieved by 1952 *Women of New China* article about *nūjie diyi*, in particular it addressed China's first female train dispatcher: "From her stalwart body [and] robust arms, I saw the form of new China's women" (Chen, 2003, p. 274). In this discourse, the female body becomes a visible sign of socialist transformation, where physical strength is the evidence of progress which directly represented the strength and

modernity of the new China. This aesthetic erasure of gender difference carried a specific political logic. Hilbertova (2012) argues that the unisex image projected a message of political identification with the revolution and emancipation (Hilbertova, 2012, p. 194). Gender-neutral bodies were understood as important instruments for breaking traditional social boundaries, and they helped women to be accepted and respected in rural communities that had historically excluded them from public roles (Hilbertova, 2012, p. 194). Looking serious and wearing simple clothes was, in this framework, the visual signature of a “politically progressive woman” (Hilbertova, 2012, p. 194). However, it is important to note that this aesthetic was not static across the Mao era. The degree to which gender difference was suppressed in visual representations of women varied across different periods and media. As will be argued in Chapter 4, propaganda posters in particular employed this visual vocabulary in ways that were calibrated to specific campaigns and target audiences.

The Moral Qualities of the New Woman

Beyond her productive role and her outward appearance, the new Maoist woman was required to embody a specific constellation of moral and political qualities. These qualities were not ancillary to the project of emancipation but central to it; they defined what kind of subject the Party sought to produce, and constituted the inner content of the new female identity. The overarching moral framework within which the new woman was located was that of the *shehui zhuyi xinren* 社会主义新人 (socialist new person), characterised above all by the subordination of private needs to collective interests and by absolute political loyalty to the Party and to Mao (Liu, 2010, p. 344). This framework was applied equally to women, who were expected to internalise the same values of selflessness, sacrifice, and collective orientation. Model workers of both sexes, as Cheung (2007) notes, were celebrated not only for their diligence but for their selfless devotion of energy to the collective (Cheung, 2007, p. 10). The distinction between

personal fulfilment and political duty was, in principle, dissolved: to serve the collective was to fulfil oneself. The mechanism through which this moral transformation was to be achieved was partly coercive and partly psychological. The Party pressed individuals to focus on their negative thoughts in order to generate guilt, and that this guilt was not subject to contestation, it was a conclusion presupposed before reflection began (Liu, 2010, p. 346). Redemption from this guilt, however, was available. It required active political and professional engagement as a form of self-salvation (Liu, 2010, p. 350). The new woman, in this logic, was perpetually in the process of becoming, perpetually working to prove her political worth through action.

Political consciousness was a further defining quality. Here the Maoist model explicitly took up and transformed the distinction between the genuine and the pseudo-modern woman articulated decades earlier. Where the pseudo-modern woman was defined by superficiality, consumerism, and self-interest, the new socialist woman was to possess a political awareness capable of analytical engagement and active participation in mass campaigns (Edwards, 2000, p. 123). Perhaps one of the most revealing moral injunction imposed on the new woman concerned happiness. As we shall see, in the propaganda imagery of the Maoist period, women were depicted as invariably smiling and radiant whether they were operating tractors, caring for children, or engaging in agricultural labour. As Bellinetti (2021) argues, happiness in communist visual propaganda lost its private connotation and became a public, national affair: “Women were happy because, and thanks to, their work for the country and the Party. Being happy, therefore, became a duty” (Bellinetti, 2021, p. 161). Wang (2010) similarly notes that the covers of *Women of New China* consistently portrayed smiling rural and ethnic minority women engaged in productive labour, holding bundles of grain, carrying baskets of cotton, or operating tractors (Wang Z., 2010, p. 837). The smile, in this context, was not an expression of private contentment but a sign of political alignment, a visible demonstration that the new woman had fully

internalised the values of the socialist order and found in them the source of her fulfilment. The figure of the new Maoist woman was thus a multi-dimensional construct. She was juridically equal, economically productive, aesthetically ungendered, morally selfless, politically loyal, and visibly happy. Each of these dimensions reinforced the others, producing a model of female subjectivity that was at once emancipatory in its stated intentions and profoundly disciplinary in its actual operations.

Chapter 3: The Visual Construction of Maoist Womanhood through Propaganda Art

3.1. The Condition of the Artist

Propaganda posters are communication tools with specific objectives aimed at modifying collective behaviour and the popular imaginary through an ideological lens. At the same time, they are also works of art that inevitably reflect the individual sensibilities of their creators. It would therefore be a mistake to regard them merely as abstract outputs derived exclusively from the Party. Posters were works of art, the product of creative labour, crafted by trained professionals with considerable artistic formation and expertise. They were, moreover, at times willing and active participants in the project of the new state, politically engaged agents, and not mere executors of directives. Understanding who these artists were, how they were trained, and within which institutional frameworks they operated adds a layer of interpretive depth to the analysis that the purely iconographic approach cannot provide.

The Artist-Cadre

Within the Maoist state, the artist frequently occupied what might be described as the position of an artist-cadre, i.e., a member of the creative intelligentsia who could simultaneously hold administrative roles within the official cultural system, such as the Chinese Artists Association. Their function was to provide creative and institutional support to the cultural apparatus while navigating the tension between political conformity and personal artistic expression. The figure of Shi Lu 石鲁 (1919-1982) is particularly instructive in this regard. His trajectory, from the son of a prominent Sichuan family to Yan'an revolutionary, exemplifies the political transformation that provided the credentials for advancement within the art establishment. As Wang (2021) documents, by 1949 Shi Lu had become “the first vice chairman

and de facto spokesperson of the Xi'an Branch of the Chinese Artists Association" (Wang, 2021, pp. 62–63). His career also illustrates a broader phenomenon termed "socialist cosmopolitanism" (Nicolai Volland, 2017, as cited in Wang, 2021, p. 65) i.e., the construction of a worldview in which China figured as a central actor in world history, and in which cultural workers were deployed abroad as diplomatic intermediaries. Shi Lu's trips to Egypt and India, which were undertaken in the service of China's efforts to position itself as a leader of the emerging Third World, consolidated his commitment to the ink medium and to figural representation (Wang, 2021, p. 65). These experiences found direct expression in his writing; in the essay *Ding tian li di de nürenmen — Yindu xiesheng suigan zhi* 頂天立地的女人們 — 印度寫生隨感之一 (Indomitable Women: Impressions from Sketching in India), he transformed ethnographic observation into a form of revolutionary solidarity, reflecting on the women he encountered through the lens of his political convictions (Wang, 2021, p. 65).

Mediation and Self-Reform

The artist's role was not limited to the production of images, it also extended to the translation of abstract state policy into visual legibility. Artists such as Shi Lu employed the formal conventions of the *nianhua* tradition (see Chapter 1, *Nianhua Influence* section) as a vehicle for disseminating specific legislative content, including the Marriage Law of 1950. The artist thus functioned as a mediator between high-level ideological directives and the perceptual horizons of the masses, rendering comprehensible what might otherwise have remained opaque. By 1949, as Wang (2021) observes, "images of figures, particularly women, were firmly established as sites of broader social significance as the communist state relied on art to influence the populace, especially when images could provide legibility to obtuse policies" (Wang, 2021, p. 62). Artistic production was, moreover, understood as inseparable from the ideological formation of the artist themselves. Cultural workers were expected to practice *caifeng* 采風 (to

collect cultural material, to collect folk customs), an activity that required travelling to rural areas to conduct ethnographic observation (Wang, 2021, p. 68). Artists were expected to live and work alongside peasants, internalising their material conditions as a means of eliminating academic individualism. As the artist Li Shaoyan 李少言 (1918-2002) observed in relation to a collective sculptural project, “the process of creation was also a process of thought reform for the artists concerned” (as cited in Dutton, 2016, p. 724). The making of an artwork was, in this framework, ontologically inseparable from the transformation of its maker. The ethnographic immersion required to produce images capable of moving the peasantry to their souls demanded, in turn, that the artists themselves be moved (Dutton, 2016, p. 724). Production was also frequently collective, individual authorship being subordinated to collaborative labour as an enactment of the spirit of socialist cooperation.

The Artist as Manager of Affect

Beyond representation and self-reform, the artist was expected to function as a manager of affect, producing not merely images, but political intensities. Dutton (2016) describes Maoist visual culture as “an art of the political” precisely in this sense: one concerned with “those social technologies that attempt to channel, harness and make concrete the fluidity of the affective realm,” working to “intensify or de-intensify the power of an affective energy flow” (Dutton, 2016, p. 720). The techniques through which this was achieved included the practice of typification, i.e., the construction of figures embodying the symbolic essence of a social class rather than any specific individual, and the use of theatricalised gesture. Rather than modelling peasant figures on the observed behaviour of actual peasants, artists were guided to draw on the stylised bodily forms of Sichuan Opera performers, whose postures and movements were expressly designed to produce, in Dutton’s words, “crying, anger and enthusiasm (*jin* 劲 [energy, expression]) as a response” (Dutton, 2016, pp. 723–724). The peasant figure in Maoist art was,

in this sense, never simply a representation of a peasant, it was a carefully constructed affective instrument requiring the artist to mediate between observation, ideology, and emotional design (Wang, 2021, pp. 63–64).

Hybridisation of Visual Traditions

A final dimension of the artist's function lay in the hybridisation of visual traditions. Maoist propaganda art emerged not from a single coherent aesthetic but from the integration of Western conventions such as realism, *chiaroscuro*, and compositional frontality, with indigenous forms, particularly ink painting and the *nianhua* tradition. The prolific artist Zhang Yuqing (1909–1993), for instance, worked as a specialist designer of New Year prints at the Shanghai People's Fine Arts Publishing House from 1956 onward, producing images characterised by a meticulous visual density rooted in the *nianhua* format (Unknown, Zhang Yuqing (章育青), n. d.). The revolutionary aesthetic that emerged from these hybridising practices was intended to be simultaneously modern and nationally rooted, a visual language that could assert China's place within a global socialist framework while remaining legible to a domestic mass audience.

Gender Asymmetries within the Artistic System

The system in which these artists operated was, however, marked by a structural gendered asymmetry that the state's rhetoric of liberation did not dissolve. The career of the photojournalist Niu Weiyu (1927-2020) illustrates this dynamic with particular clarity. A veteran of the revolution from 1945 and one of the few women to work as a photojournalist in the early PRC, Niu produced some of the most widely circulated female images of the period, including photographs of the first cohort of female pilots in New China. Yet her career also reflects a systematic constraint. As the available documentation records, "female-related news photography subjects were usually assigned to female photographers as shooting tasks" (Unknown, Niu Weiyu (牛畏予), n. d.). Women within the cultural apparatus, despite their

presence, were thus largely confined to representing femininity itself, their professional scope defined by the very gender categories that the state officially claimed to be transcending. A comparable pattern is visible in the trajectory of You Longgu (1923–1993), who after graduating from the Nanjing Central Academy joined the Shanghai People’s Fine Arts Publishing House propaganda poster team in 1955, working within the same institutional structure as her husband Ha Qiongwen (Unknown, Ha Qiongwen (哈琼文) , n. d.), a detail that, while perhaps incidental, is not without significance in the context of a system that structurally linked women’s professional identity to their domestic and conjugal roles.

The artist of the Maoist period is best understood, then, not as a fully free creator but as a cultural worker whose task was to transform ideology into visible emotion, while simultaneously undergoing a process of political formation through the very act of production. The images examined in this corpus are the outcome of this complex and constrained process, one shaped by institutional directives, collective practice, affective technique, and, as the gendered structure of the system reveals, by the same contradictions that the posters themselves were designed to resolve.

3.2. Socialist realism

Origins of Socialist Realism

As previously introduced (see Chapter 1.3), the official artistic style employed in the production of Maoist propaganda posters was inspired by the importation of socialist realism of Soviet derivation. It should be noted, however, that socialist realism does not constitute simply an artistic style, but the fundamental principle of the aesthetic conception of revolutionary politics (Wang B. , 2000, p. 101). Understanding this distinction is essential, as limiting it to a definition of style would reduce it to a matter of form, whereas its scope is of an epistemological and political order. Its founding principle consists in the truthful, historically concrete representation rooted in the revolutionary development of reality, aimed at the ideological re-education of workers in the spirit of socialism (Wang B. , 2000, p. 101). This already contains within itself a productive contradiction that defines its nature. Art must be realist, that is to say adherent to reality, while simultaneously representing that reality in its revolutionary development, projecting it toward a future yet to be constructed (Wang B. , 2000, p. 101). This is therefore not a mimesis of the present, but an ideological construction of the present as already oriented toward the socialist future. It is this tension between the claim to reality and the utopian projection that confers upon socialist realism its particular propagandistic efficacy, presenting what should be as though it already is.

The origins of socialist realism trace back to the Soviet Union, where it was officially adopted in 1934 as the guiding principle for the arts and literature. Its introduction in China was not a simple importation of the model, but a process of reworking and adaptation. The literary theorist Zhou Yang 周扬 (1908-1989) proposed as early as 1933 a significant reworking, attributing greater weight to realism as historical and empirical particularity and to the perspectives of the future socialist society. Zhou's position is theoretically significant in that it

argues that socialist realism should not translate into a schematic illustration of Marxist dogma, nor into a direct and mechanical correspondence between the work of art and ideological conventions (Wang B. , 2000, p. 101-102). Rather, artistic representation, according to Zhou, takes shape through imagination and cannot be entirely determined by pre-established political directives (Wang B. , 2000, p. 102). This position should not be read as a defence of the autonomy of art from politics; Zhou does not intend to purge art of ideology. It should be understood instead as an attempt to preserve the very efficacy of propaganda, since art reduced to a mechanical illustration of dogma loses its capacity to move the recipient emotionally, and with it its political utility. It is in this sense that Zhou's reflection anticipates one of the fundamental tensions of Maoist cultural policy, namely that between the ideological control of art and the necessity that art retain sufficient emotional and imaginative force to remain effective.



Figure 3: Picture of a Soviet Socialist Realist Propaganda Poster

Viktor Ivanov (1945)

Source: decolonization.home.blog

Understanding socialist realism in the Chinese context further requires situating it within the theoretical framework outlined by Mao Zedong in his essay *Xin minzhu zhuyi lun* 新民主主义论 (On New Democracy), which provides the political frame within which the term “socialist” in “socialist realism” must be understood. In Mao’s reading, the Chinese revolution was distinguished from the old bourgeois democratic revolution, modelled on European revolutions and led by the bourgeoisie, as the expression of a coalition of the classes of the proletariat, the peasantry, and the petty bourgeoisie (Zedong, China's New Democracy, 1941/1945, pp. 21-22), inserted within the broader worldwide proletarian movement against international capitalism (Zedong, China's New Democracy, 1941/1945, pp. 15-16). And yet its identity was not properly socialist, but that of a culture of the *New Democracy*, anti-feudal and anti-imperialist, of the great masses (Zedong, China's New Democracy, 1941/1945, p. 44). This ambiguity, a realism that defines itself as socialist but operates in a context that is not yet fully socialist, is not a contradiction to be resolved, but the very terrain upon which Chinese socialist realism is constructed. It does not describe an already existing socialist society, but actively contributes to producing the subjects and values of that future society.

The rejection of bourgeois art constitutes the third pillar upon which Maoist cultural policy is founded, and must be understood not only as an aesthetic choice but as an ideological operation of broader scope. In the *Yan'an Talks* of May 1942, Mao stated that all culture and literature belong to determinate classes and follow political lines; moreover, art for art’s sake, understood as a practice above classes and independent of politics, does not exist in reality (Zedong, Talks at the Yenan Forum on Art and Literature, 1942/1960, pp. 30-31). This statement is an epistemological declaration that denies the very possibility of neutral art. If all art is necessarily class-based, then art that claims autonomy is implicitly bourgeois, and as such an obstacle to the revolutionary project. Consistent with this framework, Mao explicitly

subordinated literature and art to politics, and with them artists and writers to the Party (Cheung, 2007, pp. 2-3), while the Ministry of Culture assumed a monopoly over artistic education, artists' associations, museums, and galleries (Cheung, 2007, p. 3). For some years Mao rejected existing Chinese artistic styles, deemed bourgeois, favouring the imitation of Soviet propaganda art (Welch, 2021, pp. 32-33). The consequences of this position for artistic production were radical. The work of art produced according to the principles of socialist realism assumed a narrative and anecdotal character, conceived to be read and understood by the masses rather than contemplated aesthetically (Cheung, 2007, p. 4), and artists were called to live among workers, peasants, and soldiers, assimilating their experiences before proceeding to creation (Hilbertova, 2012, p. 183). The rejection of bourgeois art was therefore not merely a formal rejection, but the preliminary condition for the construction of an artist-cadre whose production was entirely inscribed within the revolutionary project (see Chapter 3.1 "The Condition of the Artist" above).

Aesthetic and Stylistic Features

On the stylistic plane, socialist realism is characterised by a constitutive tension between verisimilitude and the ideological function that verisimilitude is called upon to perform. Art produced according to its principles aims at visual truth, clarity, immediate recognisability, and adherence to the perceptual experience of the recipient, not for autonomous aesthetic ends, but because the legibility of the image is the preliminary condition of its propagandistic efficacy (Ranta, 2020, p. 9). This demand for legibility translates into human figures rendered in detail, carefully modelled through light and shade, with clear contours that make them immediately distinguishable and placed in recognisable illusionistic spaces (Ranta, 2020, p. 9). The principal subject typically occupies the centre of the composition, highlighted by focused light sources and vivid colours that underscore their hierarchical centrality (Ranta, 2020, p. 9). These choices are not merely decorative. The compositional centrality of the subject reflects their ideological

centrality, while the clarity of the contours and the luminous modelling ensure that the identity and role of the subject are immediately legible even to an illiterate viewer. In China, where posters were employed as privileged vehicles of propaganda precisely by virtue of their accessibility to a largely illiterate audience, this dimension of visual legibility assumed particular importance (Ranta, 2020, p. 9). A central role in the construction of ideological meaning is played by the use of colour. The palette of Chinese socialist realism is dominated by strong and bold colours, with a marked prevalence of red. Its pervasiveness in the posters is therefore not merely an aesthetic choice, but a semiotic strategy that exploits a culturally rooted stratification of positive meanings to anchor the propagandistic message to a pre-existing system of values familiar to the recipient. As Bhardwaj (2020) observes, red is particularly effective in conveying ideological messages because it generates the illusion that following that ideology will bring prosperity, thereby activating in the recipient an automatic association between the political message and the promises of fortune and abundance that the colour conventionally evokes (Bhardwaj, 2020, p. 11). On the narrative plane, works produced according to the principles of socialist realism assume an anecdotal and didactic character, conceived to be read rather than contemplated (Cheung, 2007, p. 4). This choice integrates perfectly with the principle of “portraying the bright side”, the representation of the luminous side of the new society. Therefore, socialist realism does not represent reality as it is, but as it should be. The new heroes and heroines, with their revolutionary spirits, are normative projections of what every socialist subject is called upon to become (Cheung, 2007, p. 5). The overall effect is that of a visual system in which form and content mutually reinforce one another, producing an image of the socialist world that appears simultaneously realistic and desirable.

Iconography of the Positive Hero and the New Socialist Subject

One of the defining characteristics of socialist realism is the figure of the positive hero, who constitutes the privileged subject of visual representation. The positive hero is not simply a virtuous man or woman, but a subject endowed with purpose. Their essence resides in the total absence of hesitation or inner doubt in the pursuit of the revolution's objectives, embodying values of ideological conviction, courage, strength of will, patriotism, and a spirit of sacrifice (Cheung, 2007, p. 6). The work of art produced according to the principles of socialist realism had the explicit task of glorifying these figures, the new socialist men and women, transforming them into models of conduct to be emulated (Cheung, 2007, p. 7). The promotion of socialist heroes and heroines was considered a fundamental instrument for inspiring the masses to adhere to the socialist cause and for constructing a new national identity for China in the international context (Cheung, 2007, p. 8) (the reader is referred to Chapter 4.3). Within this perspective, the creation of the new socialist man is inscribed in a tradition of thought traceable to the reflections of the writer and linguistic reformer Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873-1929) in his *Xinminshuo* 新民說 (On the New Citizen). According to him, national power rests upon the morality, wisdom, and strength of the people, and that modernising these qualities in citizens is a necessary condition for the strengthening of the nation (Cheung, 2007, pp. 8-9). The figure of the socialist hero is therefore the visual product of this nation-building project. Consistent with what was said in the preceding paragraph on the aesthetics of socialist realism, the poster does not portray a real individual, but projects a normative image of what every socialist subject is called upon to become. It is therefore unsurprising that as early as 1938 the Communists had promoted in the border regions the figure of the *laodong mofan* 勞動模範 (model worker), or *laodong yingxiong* 勞動英雄 (labour hero), as an example to be emulated by a predominantly illiterate population (Cheung, 2007, p. 9).

On the formal plane, the bodies of socialist heroes are represented as healthy, strong, and dynamic, with energetic poses that function as a metaphor for the vitality of the productive classes upon which the revolutionary State is founded. This corporeality conveys a political message in which the physical strength of the represented subject overlaps with the collective strength of the socialist project. In the case of female figures, this logic produces one of the most significant stylistic peculiarities of Chinese socialist realism (Cheung, 2007, p. 6), namely the representation of de-gendered or aesthetically neutral female bodies. Through loose clothing devoid of gender connotations, active postures, and robust physicality, the iconography aimed to emphasise the role of women as workers and active subjects of production, breaking with the canons of traditional or bourgeois beauty (Hilbertova, 2012, p. 194). The androgynous image was therefore a political statement. Unisex clothing and energetic posture communicated identification with the revolution and emancipation, and the gender neutrality of the body helped women to be respected in rural communities, dismantling traditional hierarchies (Hilbertova, 2012, p. 194). The woman of Chinese socialist realism is therefore neither the domestic figure of the Confucian tradition, nor the aesthetically idealised woman of bourgeois culture, but a productive subject whose gender identity is subordinated to her class identity and her belonging to the revolutionary collective.

Pedagogical and Political Functions

As emerged in the preceding paragraphs, the primary function of socialist realism is teleological in nature; the artistic representation of reality in its revolutionary development must be necessarily linked to the ideological re-education and formation of workers in the spirit of socialism (Wang B. , 2000, p. 101). Art does not describe the world but transforms it, acting upon the consciousness of the recipient in order to orient it toward the values and behaviours that the revolutionary project demands. In this sense, every formal choice, every represented subject, and

every emotional register activated by the work of art is subordinated to this ultimate aim of collective transformation (Cheung, 2007, pp. 3-4). It is precisely the capacity to make the desirable coincide with the familiar that constitutes the most enduring contribution of socialist realism. By presenting the ideal model as already real and already lived, through the representation of positive figures rooted in recognisable everyday spaces and practices, the socialist poster did not propose an abstract utopia, but a concrete horizon of behaviours and values to be emulated, producing in the recipient not only consent, but a desire for conformity, acting upon the perception, the emotion, and the identity of the subject to whom it was addressed.

Chapter 4: Propaganda Posters Analysis

4.1. Poster Analysis

The following paragraphs present the main points of the visual-iconographic analysis conducted on the poster corpus previously introduced (see Methods Chapter). The posters examined have been coded according to the analytical framework outlined in the Methods Chapter, and their reading produced a set of recurring thematic patterns that cut across the original categorical groupings. These patterns have been organized into five thematic clusters, each of which aims to identify a distinct core dimension of the propagandistic visual construction of Maoist woman. Cluster 1 examines how the visual promotion of the Marriage Law of 1950 constructed conjugal freedom as an ideological value. Cluster 2 analyses the use of identifiable female figures as pedagogical instruments of ideological formation. Cluster 3 addresses the visual representation of the role of women as caregivers and the of the new Chinese society and the role of the Nation enabling women to emancipate from their feudal domestic duties. Cluster 4 analyses the representation and personification of women in female workers figures, tracing the redefinition of femininity through productive contribution. Lastly, cluster 5 turns to the representation of the youngest subjects addressed by the propaganda. For each cluster, a selection of posters considered most exemplary of the concept has been made. Together, these five clusters aim to reveal a layered system of ideological address through which the reconfiguration of gender roles and the mobilisation of women were pursued. For a complete view of all the posters analysed, the reader is referred to Appendix 1. For the respective analysis carried out on each poster, the reader is referred to Appendix 2.

4.2. Cluster 1: Marriage

As introduced in Chapter 2, one of the founding principles of the Marriage Law was the intention to disrupt the practices of the feudal family and matrimonial system. Among the core values promoted by the CCP was the individual emancipation of women in particular, so that they could be actively engaged in the revolution and in the construction of the new socialist society as full participants. To this end, what the Law promoted was freedom of conjugal choice, conceived as the first step toward emancipation. A happy marriage meant happy citizens, and therefore a happy society, implicitly sets against the dissatisfaction engendered by the old family systems that the Law sought to abolish. The posters analysed in this cluster are a direct visual index of this aim of transformation. Read as a whole, they do not merely celebrate the new legal dispensation; rather, they aim to construct an emotional and ideological architecture through which the intended audience, predominantly young women, was invited to internalise the Party's vision of conjugal life as a form of revolutionary practice. What is immediately apparent from an initial observation is precisely the emotional deployment of positive emotions as a persuasive register. Rather than the more generic term "joy", the more contextually precise conceptual category operating in this cluster is *xingfu* 幸福 (happiness, blessing), a term that encompasses not only joy and happiness but a broader condition of wellbeing and personal fulfilment in the one who experiences it. Reading these images through the lens of *xingfu* rather than the more simplistic "joy" allows for a more accurately grounded analysis. This interpretive lens therefore fits more naturally within the context under analysis and the political discourse it entails. What is suggested is a sense of personal fulfilment implicitly linked to the lifestyle proposed by Maoism, in implicit contrast with the suffering of the feudal past. What the posters construct, as we shall see in the following examples, is not only an atmosphere of cheerfulness, but a politically coded vision of socialist flourishing in which the correct conjugal choice becomes one of the

most visible signs of a life lived in alignment with the values the new order proposes. In this respect, poster A-1 (Figure 4) offers one of the most illustrative examples. At the centre of the composition stands a couple who have just registered their marriage. Both figures hold, presumably, the registration certificate in one hand, while clasping their partner's hand with the other. The figures of the newlyweds are framed by red decorative elements, a clear anchoring of the scene within a field of auspicious symbolism. The text of the Marriage Law is clearly visible in the background, rendering the document as an explicit founding reference upon which happiness rests. Particularly noteworthy are the gazes of the figures depicted. Both look directly at the viewer with open smiles. The figures are not offered to the viewer's gaze as mere objects of contemplation; rather, they actively address the viewer, establishing what might be described as a dialogic relationship through their gaze. The viewer is thus drawn into the scene through the couple's open smiles and expressions charged with emotional fulfilment. This is interpretable as an invitation to emulation, generating a sense of recognition and warmth, as though the figures were looking the viewer in the face and inviting them to partake in their joy and fulfilment, their *xingfu*. This welcoming sense of warmth is also discernible in the postures of the figures, which are upright yet dynamic, with open shoulders and bodies oriented toward the viewer. The compositional tension of the couple joined by the hand, which clearly symbolises the union of the spouses, is further reinforced by the hands holding the certificates. Particularly in the case of the husband, the certificate is raised and clearly visible, functioning as a visual vector that draws the eye toward the document as the central and meaningful element of the composition. Its prominent visibility furthermore ensures that even an illiterate audience, unable to read the textual elements present in the composition, would nonetheless be able to identify the central element of the image and grasp the message it carries. Finally, the background is rendered in a pale pink, a further element suggesting warmth and welcome. This chromatic choice presumably

aims to associate the scene with a sense of security that lowers the viewer's emotional defences. This is complemented by the aqua green and yellow of the figures' clothing, colours that simultaneously break from the background while their soft tones suggest a reassuring vibrancy. The semiotic operation of the image is precise. The poster does not speak exclusively of free marriage, but intends to represent its positive externalisation on the social level. Joy/*xingfu* is presented as self-evident proof of the Law's validity, inviting the viewer to reason backwards from the image of happiness to its presumed cause, namely the correct, Party-sanctioned choice of partner.



Figure 4: Yunjie, Y. (1953).

Poster A-1: 自由婚姻美满幸福 [Freedom of marriage, happiness and prosperity].

Source: Chinese-posters.net

This conflation of personal happiness and political correctness is not unique to A-1. A similar logic is elaborated in other posters through different registers. In A-2 (Figure 5), marriage is shown to enhance agricultural productivity, extending the benefits of a correct conjugal choice from the private sphere to the public one. Turning to the gazes of the figures, it is possible to observe that he looks at her, while she looks elsewhere. This suggests two distinct relationships with the viewer. Her gaze exits the scene, but her smile is directed toward us and clearly visible. At the semiotic analytical level, this constitutes a demand (the reader is referred to the Methods Chapter for the concepts of *offer* and *demand*). She is the ideological fulcrum of the scene, addressing the viewer and, in particular, the female viewer, implicitly communicating: “look how well I am.” His gaze, by contrast, constitutes an *offer* directed toward her, and its affective function is to validate the scene. A man who looks at a working woman in this way communicates approval. The message conveyed is therefore twofold. The woman communicates a sense of *xingfu*, while the man who gazes at her confirms this happiness as something desirable. Also, worthy of attention are the objects held by the figures. The sickle is an active tool, one that cuts, yet in the scene depicted the man does not use it; rather, he holds it in a relaxed manner. She, by contrast, holds an abundant sheaf of wheat, an action that requires open arms. This division suggests an inversion of the traditional gender hierarchy. Both are working, but in a complementary manner: she already in the result, holding the harvest, he in the process, carrying the tool. Together, they form a productive cycle that reinforces the affective message: free marriage not only produces happiness, visible in the gazes of the subjects, but also abundance and prosperity, made visible in the generous sheaf of wheat held by the woman. On the chromatic plane, the colours employed are warm, creating a welcoming scene. Her dress is rendered in a shade of warm pink, the most vivid colour within the scene, establishing her visual prominence. She is the centre of the poster, and the colour announces this from the very first glance. He, by

contrast, is dressed in white with a limited use of red, confined to the inner part of his garment. White is a visually less impactful colour, and this positions the male figure as one of support rather than prominence, confirming an absence not of importance, but a compositional hierarchy that reinforces the reading of the gazes in which she is the subject and he the context. The dominant colour of the scene, however, is the golden yellow that occupies the lower register of the poster. It is the warmest colour in the composition, surrounding the bodies of the figures and creating a sense of envelopment that transfers affectively to the relationship the figures seek to establish with the viewer. Furthermore, the figure of the wheat functions as a *pathosformeln*, an iconographic motif that traverses centuries. When the viewer looks at the woman with the wheat in her arms, a deep affective repertoire of abundance, fertility, and security is activated, one that precedes any conscious political or non-political interpretation of the scene. As in the previous example, the underlying message nonetheless remains constant, happiness is not an individual feeling but a social indicator, evidence that the subject has aligned herself with the values of the new socialist order. The emotional appeal thus merges with the ideological one.



Figure 5: Bi, C. (1953).

Poster A-2: 自由自主结婚好, 团结生产幸福多

[Free-choice marriage is good; collective production brings happiness].

Source: Chinese-posters.net

A further instructive example is offered by poster A-4 (Figure 6), which complicates this picture in a revealing way. The composition depicts a couple riding together on a cart. The woman holds a scroll tied with a red ribbon, presumably the marriage certificate. One of the first things that strikes the viewer is undoubtedly the dynamism of the scene. The cart is in motion, the whip is raised, and the bodies are slightly off-balance. The whip creates an ascending diagonal line that carries energy and direction toward the right, beyond the frame of the scene. Unlike A-1 and A-2, none of the figures here look toward the viewer. The woman gazes forward, while the man looks toward her. These are clear instances of offer. The viewer is not addressed directly but is instead invited to observe a private scene, which translates on the affective level into an invitation to identify directly with the figures depicted. The viewer witnesses the couple's joy, which the poster implicitly proposes as something desirable. The couple's joy can be noticed through their smiling expressions, their relaxed postures, all reinforced by the blossoming flowers and the flying butterflies. On the chromatic plane, as in the preceding cases, warm and enveloping tones predominate, creating a welcoming atmosphere designed to elicit positive sensations in the viewer. The only cool tone is provided by the blue of the woman's clothing, which makes her stand out against the other elements of the scene. As in A-2, this draws attention to the central element of the composition, namely the woman and her state of *xingfu*. He, by contrast, wears a light-yellow jacket with a cloth on his head, both elements of everyday peasant clothing that facilitate the viewer's identification with the scene. The floral motifs of the woman's clothing echo the peach blossom branches in the upper register of the scene. The flowering branches suggest that the scene takes place in spring, the season of renewal and fertility, which accords with the message of joy and serenity, of *xingfu*, that the poster seeks to convey. Chromatically, the blossoms of the tree and those of the woman's clothing create a visual coherence that merges the woman with the surrounding nature, intertwining femininity and

blossoming. The message the viewer perceives is thus one of connection between the woman and the depicted environment; the woman is like spring itself, renewal and freedom. The butterflies add a further layer of meaning rooted in Chinese literary and popular tradition, specifically in the legend of Liang Shanbo 梁山伯 and Zhu Yingtai 祝英台, immediately recognisable to a viewer of the period. The newlywed couple is thus visually compared to butterflies flying together, as in the legend, becoming an emblem of the loving couple par excellence. The reader is referred to the study by Idema (2010) for a more in-depth understanding of the legend. A crucial element of the scene is the document held in the woman's hand. The object, however, is not fully interpretable without the aid of the caption, which reads: "A self-chosen marriage, full of joy on the way home from registration." Unlike A-1, in which the Marriage Law appears as a legible visual element within the composition, the iconography of A-4 remains opaque without its verbal gloss. It is the caption that transforms the scroll into a marriage certificate, which suggests that this poster was likely directed at a more educated urban or semi-urban audience. This points to a broader characteristic of Maoist propaganda posters, which operated as composite semiotic systems in which the visual and the written element became mutually constitutive. Taken as a whole, the poster seduces the viewer affectively, inviting them to identify with the figures depicted. This, however, is consistently linked, in this case implicitly yet nonetheless clearly, to the reform of marriage. The figures are happy, and this happiness flows from the choice of a conscious marriage made possible by the reform introduced by the law. The poster thus succeeds in transforming a juridical norm into something natural and desirable, presenting it not as a Party intervention upon tradition, but as a natural order, as natural as spring itself or the flight of butterflies.



Figure 6: Wu, D. (1953).

Poster A-4: 婚姻自己作主張登記回來喜洋洋

[Take charge of your own marriage and return joyfully after registration].

Source: Chinese posters.net.

Taken together, the posters in this cluster construct a psychological arc that is central to understanding propaganda as a means of mass mobilisation. In the first instance, the viewer is emotionally recruited through images of *xingfu* associated with the values promoted by the Party, as seen in A-1, A-2 and A-4. This happiness is then contextualised within a framework of civic meaning, the correct conjugal choice presented as a value upheld and sanctioned by the Party. These emotional and civic registers are finally subsumed within an explicitly revolutionary context, in which personal happiness becomes contingent on the prior fulfilment of collective duties. This reflects the logic of ideological interpellation, whereby the subject is first addressed at the level of desire, then invited to identify that desire with a broader social project, and finally called upon to shape and discipline personal desire in the name of that project. Marriage is therefore simultaneously an index of female emancipation, insofar as women are called upon to choose their own destiny autonomously, and an instrument of governance through which the Party's authority extends into private life and the desires of the individual.

4.3. Cluster 2: Exemplary Women

As discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, the Party did not limit itself to promoting abstract values; rather, it employed concrete, named, and identifiable female figures as embodiments of revolutionary ideals. This strategy reflects a broader feature of Maoist propaganda culture, namely the pedagogical intent behind the use of exemplary figures or historical events as models of correct conduct. To this end, what the Party asked of women was to emancipate themselves and become productive members of society, showing them through specific individuals whose emancipation, productivity, and social value had already been put into practice. At this point, it becomes necessary to provide some context regarding the productive and economic conditions of the country in the early 1950s, a period in which two imperatives placed industrial production at the centre of national priorities. The first was the Korean War (1950-1953), and the second was the imminent launch of the First Five-Year Plan (1953-1957), modelled on the Soviet experience and grounded in the industrialisation of the country through centralised productive targets. The war on one hand, with the productive demands it entailed, and the acceleration of industrial progress on the other, required a rapid expansion of domestic productive capacity (Samarani, 2017, pp. 288-289), while simultaneously calling for a new type of worker, innovative and ideologically committed. It is within this conjuncture that posters such as B-8 represent a fitting example of the process underway. Poster B-8 (Figure 7) depicts a young woman in a textile factory, wearing a work shirt and a white apron, positioned in the foreground against the machinery of her workplace. The figure is clearly individualised through her distinct facial features, hair with fringe and specific work attire, together with the biographical caption that helps to identify her name and details her working career. This gives her a recognisable appearance that sets her apart from other anonymous females types prevalent elsewhere in the corpus. Her gaze is confident, and her working clothes function simultaneously as a sign of her

productive role and as a marker of her belonging to the new socialist order, as a woman actively engaged in the country's productive effort. The perspectival structure of the scene presents rows of yarn bobbins extending symmetrically toward the back of the factory, creating two converging vanishing lines that draw the eye toward a central point at which the main subject of the scene is positioned, namely the woman. This perspectival construction directs the viewer's gaze toward her, who does not simply emerge from the scene but rather appears as though the scene itself has been constructed around her. On the affective level, this produces a sense of inevitability, communicating to the viewer that this person is somehow important. The protagonist's gaze is frontal and smiling, constituting a demand. However, unlike other cases previously analysed, hers is not a gaze of invitation or romantic warmth, but rather one of confidence and competence. The angle of the gaze is slightly upward, constructing a relationship of hierarchical prominence of the subject over the viewer. This immediately communicates that the figure depicted holds a certain authority and commands respect. Chromatically, the white apron is the most visually prominent element of the composition, imposing itself on the viewer's attention and separating the figure from the surrounding environment. At the same time, it functions as a role marker. This is not ordinary clothing, but a uniform that constructs a professional identity. The viewer immediately recognises that this person occupies a precise occupational and social role. In sum, the pre-discursive affective message is that the woman depicted is a figure of importance, and for a woman of that time unaccustomed to seeing herself represented in this way, the image provokes admiration and a desire for emulation, rendering the poster a genuine political instrument. The caption, though partially illegible, allows the viewer to identify the subject as Hao Jianxiu 郝建秀 (1935–). She was a young textile worker whose story would have been well known to the contemporary audience. Hao had entered the Sixth State-Run Cotton Textile Factory in Qingdao at the age of thirteen and, before turning sixteen, developed the fine yarn

processing method, a technical innovation subsequently promoted nationwide in 1951 that brought significant productivity gains to the entire textile industry. She later rose to become Minister of the Textile Industry and Vice Chairperson of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (Unknown, 50 niandai xuanchuan hua li de nü lao mo, 2019, author's translation). The celebratory value of her figure lies in her role as a worker and emancipated woman who was able to give expression to her ingenuity while contributing in an exceptional way to the productive effort of the entire nation. The viewer is thus implicitly invited to take Hao Jianxiu as an example, to emancipate herself, and to engage actively in the process of national construction. It should be noted that the biographical details surrounding Hao Jianxu appear to function less as verifiable historical record than as elements of a constructed narrative. This does not render the accounts of her biography necessarily false, but rather suggests that they are selective, emphasising what is ideologically useful. The precision regarding her age, the timing of the innovation, its national impact, and so forth, render the account far more consistent with the intention of constructing ideal narrative figures whose lives perfectly embodied the collective values promoted by the Party.



Figure 7: Unknown. (1953).

Poster B-8: 創造科學工作法的郝建秀 [Hao Jianxiu, creator of a scientific work method].
Source: Chinese posters.net.

Beyond productive value, what could equally be celebrated was the contribution to revolutionary construction through martyrdom, a process of mythmaking in which exemplary figures are taken as emblems and elevated to saintlike status as models for posterity. A paradigmatic case of this process is Liu Hulan 刘胡兰 (1932–1947). Born in Yunzhouxu village, Shanxi Province, Liu joined the Communist Party in 1946 and became secretary of the local Women's Federation, playing an active role in mobilising villagers in support of the CCP during the civil war. According to the official Party account of the events, on 12 January 1947 Nationalist troops surrounded the village and demanded that any Party members present surrender themselves. When no one complied, a traitor identified Liu and several others. Despite the commander's attempts to persuade her to renounce her affiliation and name other members, Liu refused, even as she witnessed her fellow Party members executed before her. She then voluntarily approached the decapitation blade, bidding farewell to the assembled villagers. She was fourteen years old. Mao Zedong subsequently commemorated her sacrifice with the inscription that would come to define her legacy: "A great life, a glorious death" (Farley, Liu Hulan - 'A great life, a glorious death', 2021, p. 59).

Regarding the visual propaganda representations of Liu Hulan, this analysis will focus on posters B-13 (Figure 8) and B-15 (Figure 9), considered particularly illustrative of the concept they are intended to embody. Poster B-13 gives visual form to her narrative through a composition divided into two registers. In the upper portion, a close-up portrait of Liu Hulan dominates the image, rendered in detail and positioned above the scene depicted below, establishing her as a figure of authority and symbolic elevation even within the space of her own martyrdom. In the lower register, the historical scene is depicted. Liu stands at the centre, surrounded by other figures, her posture conveying what the caption describes as unyielding courage in the face of the enemy. By separating the portrait from the scene, the poster presents

Liu simultaneously as a historical actor, a young woman caught in a specific moment of political violence, and as a transcendent symbol. Her portrait is elevated above the narrative, as if she already inhabited a timeless and superior dimension. The two-register compositional structure communicates from the outset that the figure in question exists simultaneously on the historical and the transcendental plane. The portrait in the upper register renders her as an icon even before any reading of the image takes place. The scene in the lower register, by contrast, communicates conflict. Particular attention should be paid to her vertical and static posture, set within a context in which those around her are in motion and adopt oblique poses. This verticality amid diagonals constructs a sense of bodily resistance, as though communicating 'I will not yield' before the viewer has any knowledge of her story. Her gaze is directed neither toward the soldiers and figures surrounding her, nor toward the viewer, but toward something outside the frame of the scene, and this occurs in both registers of the composition. This constitutes a double offer, inviting the viewer to contemplate the scene and draw meaning from what is depicted. As regards the colours employed, cool and light tones predominate. The most visually prominent chromatic element is Liu Hulan's blue dress, which breaks against her pale complexion. This colour palette produces an affective effect of purity and transcendence. No warm colours are used to invite identification; rather, a colour that creates separation is chosen, and thus elevation of the figure above the ordinary world. In the lower register, by contrast, a chromatic transition can be observed from top to bottom, moving from the white and pale blue that, as noted, creates separation, to the ochre of the earth, which produces a greater sense of materiality and reality. The higher the eye travels, the lighter and cooler the palette becomes. This chromatic transition communicates to the viewer a sense of the woman's ascension, having risen from an earthly place toward something higher. Also, worthy of note is the near absence of shadows. The upper icon is illuminated by a diffuse and uniform light. The figure thus appears not as a real person under

natural light, but as one already idealised and eternal. The caption is unusually extensive for a propaganda poster. It recounts the key moments of the young woman's life and concludes with Mao's inscription: "Mao Zedong once praised her, saying: 'A great life, a glorious death,' to honour her sacrifice." This functions as the authoritative interpretive frame for everything the viewer sees. Unlike other cases examined in this analysis, the caption here performs a different function, that of narrating and providing the viewer with the full arc of the protagonist's story, condensed into a few lines that move from martyrdom to posthumous recognition. The effect of the poster is precisely that of supplying this meaning in full, leaving no ambiguity about how Liu Hulan's death is to be understood. Through this process of mythmaking, the viewer is implicitly confronted with the embodiment of the Party's values, invited to emulate them and to take Liu Hulan as a model of fearless personal engagement in the revolutionary struggle.



Figure 8: Unknown. (n.d.)
Poster B-13a: Poster depicting Liu Hulan.
 Source: Cultural China.

Poster B-15 shows the transmission of the myth constructed in posters such as B-13. The composition depicts a young girl and a young boy in school uniform, both holding books. The girl is pointing toward a statue of Liu Hulan visible in the background. The statue occupies a position of hierarchical elevation, rendered in white and gold against a red ground, its scale and placement marking it as the authoritative presence around which the entire scene is organised. The posture of the statue is upright and frontal, with arms at its sides, creating a continuity with the scene depicted in B-13. The monument thus freezes Liu Hulan's moment of supreme courage in the act of refusing to yield. The bronze-golden tones of the statue insert the figure into the register of civic glory. Bronze and gold are the colours of medals and monuments, conferring upon the figure of Liu a sense of authority and emblematic worth. The caption reads: "Learn from the heroes of the people." The statue serves to mediate the historical figure into the present. Liu Hulan is no longer a girl who died in 1947, but a monument of civic veneration and a permanent reference point for the generations that follow. The girl pointing toward the statue shows how to orient oneself within a moral and political world in which Liu Hulan functions as a fixed and unquestionable point of reference. The boy who listens positions the viewer as a recipient of this same transmission, implicitly invited to assume the same posture of attentive learning. The girl is the most compositionally active element of the scene. Her body is oriented toward the statue while her head turns toward the boy, simultaneously holding both directions. Her pointing finger constitutes the most explicit narrative vector in the composition, creating an ascending diagonal line that directs the eye and the attention of both the boy and the viewer toward Liu Hulan. The boy occupies the right-hand position in the composition, the position of the "new". Within the interpretive framework of Van Leeuwen and Kress (2006), elements placed on the left are presented as the "given", a familiar and shared point of departure for the message, while elements on the right represent the "new", the new information to which the

viewer must direct their attention (Van Leeuwen & Kess, 2006, p. 217). The boy is therefore the recipient of the message, and the composition reinforces this reading. The pointing finger directs his attention toward Liu Hulan, positioning her as the agent of moral instruction. The boy listens and thus receives the implicit message that the composition constructs, as though the girl was saying: “Look at her and take her as your example. Be like her.” Furthermore, the three elements, namely the girl, the boy, and the statue, form a triangle with the statue at the upper vertex and the children at the base, and the relationship suggested among them is one of elevation toward an ideal embodied by the statue. A similar concept is expressed in poster B-16 (Figure 10), where a statue of Liu Hulan is surrounded by citizens of all ages and genders gathered around it. The statue occupies the highest position in the composition, elevated above all the human figures who observe it. The myth has completed its trajectory from historical event to martyr’s portrait to monument to object of collective memory. The statue occupies the upper third of the composition, and its visual presence dominates the entire scene, functioning as the centre around which everything is organised. Its upright, frontal posture with the chin slightly raised, as in B-15, is the posture of courage. White is the dominant colour, immediately drawing the viewer’s attention and suggesting that the figure carries a greater significance than everything surrounding her. The contrast with the warm tones of the figures around her accentuates this, creating a thermal distance between the colour registers that suggests a distinction between the plane of myth, embodied by Liu Hulan, and the plane of the living. She is above, cold and permanent, while the others are below, looking up toward her. The crowd is deliberately heterogeneous. A mother and child, a young girl, a soldier in uniform, an elderly man, and others are all recognisable; no category is excluded, workers, peasants, the young and the old alike. This heterogeneity carries a strong ideological valence on the level of identification. Whoever looks at the poster finds someone in the crowd who resembles them, indicating that everyone can, and must, draw

inspiration from the model embodied by the statue. A further valence operates on the ideological plane. The heterogeneous crowd also visually represents the united nation, not distinct classes, but a people that recognises itself around a shared moral reference point, one that embodies the values of courage and resilience promoted by the Party.



Figure 9: *Qian, D. (1954).*

Poster B-15: 向人民英雄学习 [Learn from the people's heroes].

Source: Chinese posters.net.



chinese posters . net

Figure 10: Zhang, D.; Situ, H. (1955).

Poster B-16: 在美术展览会上 [Meeting at the art exhibition].

Source: Chinese posters . net.

Read as a whole, the posters of this cluster celebrate the social value embodied by individual women, holding them up as a standard for all others. Individual excellence is immediately transformed into collective property. Hao Jianxiu's technical innovation becomes a national method, Liu Hulan's death becomes a monumental slogan and a lesson for children. This celebration of exceptional individuals was never purely individual; in several cases, the woman is celebrated not only for what she is, but for the transformation her figure is designed to catalyse, in other words, for what her example produces in others. The posters examined here are genuine instruments of female emancipation insofar as they insist on the visibility of women in spaces, such as the factory floor, the battlefield, and public halls, from which they had previously been excluded. They name women, individualise them, and elevate them. Yet this visibility is always conditional. What is being promoted is not female subjectivity as such, but female subjectivity in the service of the revolution. The correct woman is the productive woman, the brave woman, the self-sacrificing woman, in both the labour and the revolutionary sense. Women are invited into new social spaces, but the terms of that invitation are set entirely by the Party, and the price of admission is the subordination of individual desire to collective duty.

4.4. Cluster 3: Women as Caregivers

As already established, Maoist propaganda promoted female emancipation through the celebration of conjugal freedom and the elevation of exemplary citizenship. Yet there was a practical obstacle at the centre of this emancipatory project. If women were called to participate actively in production and in the construction of the new socialist society, the question of domestic care and childcare required an answer. In this case, it was the Nation that proposed itself as a substitute for the family as the primary site of care, freeing women, or at least some of them, from the domestic sphere in order to redirect them toward production.

An example of this concept is poster C-1 (Figure 11). Depicted here is the interior of a nursery or childcare centre. The scene suggests an atmosphere of domestic warmth while also evoking an institutional setting. The depicted room is spacious and filled with children, attended by women in white coats. No parental figures are recognisable with the exception of one, who is presumably a mother on the point of accompanying her child to the childcare centre. All other figures are professional caregivers whose expressions convey attentiveness and warmth, occupied with the care of the children. The atmosphere is calm and organised. No child is crying, and no caregiver appears flustered, communicating that in this place the children are well, happy, and cared for. The postures of the caregivers, frequently inclined toward the children, construct a visual framework in which the diagonals of the adult figures are oriented downward toward the younger ones, visually communicating a system of attentiveness directed from the adults toward the children. No caregiver is distant, and this conveys that the care provided is as warm and personal as maternal care itself. On the chromatic plane, the first thing that strikes the viewer is that the poster operates through two simultaneous and contrasting systems. The cold and institutional register of the walls and white coats, and the warm and vital register of the children's and the mother's clothing. The green of the walls is rendered in a cool tone that communicates

order and hygiene. On the affective level, this produces reassurance; any mother viewing the poster, its presumable target audience, immediately recognises that shade of green as the colour of places where professional care is provided, transferring a message of reliability. The white of the nurses' coats creates luminous figures that emerge from the background, rendering the caregivers immediately identifiable within the scene. Here too, the coat communicates hygiene and professionalism. It is a garment worn over ordinary clothing, creating a physical barrier between the caregiver's body and what she comes into contact with, an effect reinforced by the white colour, which maximises the communication of cleanliness. The children's clothing is rendered in shades of red and yellow, warm colours. The children are the most colourful and the most vivid presences in the scene, communicating that the vitality of the infants, visible also through their joyful expressions, is not suppressed by the institution but rather flourishes within it. The chromatically most anomalous figure is the woman at the centre. She does not wear the white coat of the other figures, which allows her to be clearly distinguished, but rather clothing in vivid colours that allows her to be identified with the outside world. Her expression communicates a clear sense of happiness mixed with serenity. Taken as a whole, this conveys affectively that a woman can entrust her child to this environment and be confident of finding them happy upon her return. The care taking place in the scene is organized and collective, resembling state-administered care rather than familial care. Above all the figures, it is possible to notice a portrait of Mao. It is as though the portrait presides over the scene as its symbolic guarantor. Hanging on one of the walls is a sort of poster or banner that functions as a semi-caption, which reads: "Take good care of the children so that mothers can work with peace of mind." Those who take good care of the children are the workers of the factory nursery, as suggested by the lower caption printed in small text at the bottom, thus ensuring that mothers are free to work without worry. In this context, what is celebrated is not so much the woman as

caregiver, but rather the woman liberated from her caregiving duty. The nursery embodies in this case an extension of the Party-State, which assumes the function of overseeing the wellbeing of its citizens. By representing the State as the provider of care, the poster implicitly redefines the relationship between the family and the Party. The family is no longer the primary unit of social reproduction, as the State has stepped into that role, offering a form of collective parenthood that supplements and supplants the private sphere. The presence of Mao's portrait in a position of hierarchical elevation above the caregivers and the children reinforces this interpretation. His image, consistent across several cases within the corpus, functions as the symbolic embodiment of Party authority, and its hierarchical positioning suggests that the care dispensed in this nursery flows ultimately from the values and will of the revolutionary order it represents.



Figure 11: Tao, T., & Lü, P. (1953).
Poster C-1: 工厂托儿所 [Factory nursery].
 Source: Chinese-posters.net.

Another poster exemplifying this concept is poster C-6 (Figure 12). In this case, two female figures are depicted, one of whom is a nurse. Both women hold a swaddled infant in their arms. The two women and the newborn form a triangle, their bodies inclining toward one another and converging toward the child at the centre, who becomes the focal point of the scene. The child is placed at the centre as the nucleus around which the entire scene revolves. Neither of the two women looks toward the viewer, creating a double offer in which the viewer is not addressed directly but invited to observe the scene. The swaddling in which the newborn is wrapped is rendered in yellow, the chromatically warmest and most luminous element of the composition. The swaddling is framed by a red ribbon at the centre of the composition, which immediately draws the viewer's attention through a chromatic contrast that communicates celebration while simultaneously connecting the newborn to the revolutionary sphere, echoing the red neckerchief of the young revolutionaries and suggesting that the child has come into the world in the new China and, from its very first moment, under the sign of the Party. In the background, a vase of roses is visible, whose presence creates a warm chromatic halo that envelops the scene, further communicating celebration. The pink of the roses echoes the scarf of the woman on the left, connecting the elements of the composition. Just as the blossoming roses represent life in full flower, so a new life coming into the world produces joy. In the background, a circular element features a profile portrait of Mao. Its elevated position communicates that the child entering the world does so under a world already bearing the seal of Maoism, which watches over them from above. The caption reads: "Mothers and children are protected by the state." In this case, the use of the verb *baohu* 保护 (to protect) is significant, as the position of the State is not merely that of a provider of practical services, but that of a guardian whose care extends to the most vulnerable members of society.



Figure 12: Publicity Department of the Ministry of Health of the Central People's Government. (1954).

Poster C-6: 母亲和儿童受国家的保护 [Mothers and children are protected by the state].

Source: Chineseposters.net.

Taken as a whole, the posters in this cluster illustrate a fundamental aspect of the Maoist emancipatory project. The woman, who no longer bears sole responsibility for childcare, is materially freer to participate in public and productive life. However, the terms of this liberation are set entirely by the State, and the beneficiary of the woman's freed labour is not the woman herself but the collective productive effort. Furthermore, the State that aims to free the woman from domestic care, simultaneously extends its authority into the domestic sphere, assuming a quasi-parental role over her children and, by implication, over the values with which those children will be raised. The nursery therefore becomes a site of ideological formation, as the presence of Mao's portraits makes visually explicit. What is promoted, then, is not the abolition of the domestic sphere, but its nationalization. The Party assumes the function of the traditional family while redefining both the role of the woman and the boundaries of state authority over private life.

4.5. Cluster 4: Women in Labour and Production

The posters examined in the previous cluster demonstrated how the Party resolved the tension between emancipation and domestic duties. The present cluster will examine what this participation looked like in visual terms and through what rhetorical strategies it was promoted. The posters of Group D constitute a rich representation of women across the full spectrum of the national economy, ranging from agricultural fields, textile factories, and shipyards to postal routes and parachute units. In this way, the aim was to construct a new norm of femininity defined not only by the domestic and conjugal role, but by productive contribution.

Poster D-3 (Figure 13) depicts three female parachuters at the centre of the composition. Their posture conveys pride and confidence. Their open parachutes suggest they have just landed, and the movement of their hands suggests they are saluting what one assumes to be an acclaiming audience. The three figures occupy the lower two thirds of the poster, their bodies projecting upward and to the right in an ascending diagonal movement. The central figure is the most upright, with open shoulders and her head slightly raised, her face displaying a smile directed toward something outside the frame of the scene, constructing a presence that communicates authority and confidence to the viewer. The figure on the left has her body rotated toward the centre, a gesture that communicates cohesion with the rest of the group, her hand open in a salute also directed beyond the scene. Particular attention should be paid to the gestures of the hands, which show open palms in salute rather than closed fists or signs of struggle and resistance. This communicates a sense of joy to the viewer and invites them to share and participate in the triumph represented by the scene. None of the three figures looks directly at the viewer. Their gazes are directed predominantly to the right, toward a plausible but not fully identifiable acclaiming crowd, made present only through the reaction of the protagonists. These instances of offer implicitly communicate that the viewer is not the direct recipient of the salute, producing a sense of partial

exclusion that generates desire. The chromatic palette follows a vertical direction, moving from a bright blue and white sky above to a green field below, with the bodies of the women at the centre functioning as a zone of transition. The sky is open and luminous, producing a sensation of freedom and space. The green of the equipment is a military green, but it is worn over civilian clothing, indicating that the military dimension does not erase the personal one but is layered over it. This communicates to the viewer that the figures depicted are ordinary people, suggesting that the action performed by the three protagonists can be undertaken by any citizen, and specifically by any female citizen. Behind them, numerous parachutes are depicted, and their repetition across the sky suggests that the image represents a larger number of women who have performed the same brave activity. On the affective level, this suggests that the sky is full of parachuters, women among them, as the presence of the protagonists confirms. For a female viewer in 1954, likely accustomed to seeing herself represented in conditions of submission and hardship, this is already a revolutionary message. A female body, too, can inhabit the sky. The caption reads: "Female parachuters." Parachuting was among the most exclusively male-coded activities imaginable. It is physically demanding, militarily associated, and requires technical training and a tolerance of danger, all qualities that patriarchal discourse systematically attributed to men alone. The use of a concise caption that registers no sense of exceptionality further suggests the social shift promoted by Maoist values. Women can be parachuters too, just as men can. The depiction of numerous parachutes in the background reinforces this logic, as where a single parachute might represent an individual achievement, the multiplication of parachuters signals a pattern, a new norm of social reality in which women occupy the sky as a matter of course. The emotion represented in the figures is joy mixed with pride, but it is a collective joy. The three women stand together, their faces are readable, but their significance is inseparable from the group they form. This is consistent with the rhetorical logic of the cluster. The woman

who works, who participates, and who enters unconventional spaces, does so not as an individual exercising a personal right, but as a member of a collectively engaged project. Her pride is the pride of contribution, and her joy/*xingfu* is the joy/*xingfu* her act produces within the collectiveness.



Figure 13: Xu, J. (1954).

Poster D-3: 女跳伞员 [Female parachutist].

Source: Chinese posters.net.

Poster D-4 (Figure 14) shifts the context to the industrial sphere. Two women are depicted engaged in welding work at a shipyard. Their bodies are positioned in the foreground and oriented toward the task. Their equipment, consisting of goggles, gloves, and a work suit, marks them as competent workers. Behind them, other workers are represented engaged in similar tasks, establishing women not as anomalies in the industrial space, but as ordinary participants in a collective productive effort. An ideal female viewer of those years would thus see a team of women in work suits in an industrial shipyard, equipped with heavy tools such as welding torches and surrounded by ships and machinery. The pre-discursive message is therefore that women can also be found in environments such as a shipyard, a space they are not accustomed to inhabiting. There is no tension or exceptionality in their bodies; they are all as at ease as anyone else in that shipyard. The affective effect is thus one of normalisation. Even before reasoning about what the scene intends to represent, the viewer perceives it as an ordinary scene. The palette is dominated by white and brown tones, with the sparks of the welding process providing the only warm light in the composition. The white work suits are the dominant chromatic element which, like the white coats in C-1, communicate professionalism. However, on closer reflection, it is possible to note that white is an unusual colour for a shipyard. A white work suit would become dirty immediately, yet these suits are immaculate. This may therefore constitute a deliberate ideological choice. Female labour in the shipyard is presented as clean and dignified, not degrading. The women do not get dirty, or rather, even though the work is physically demanding, their dignity remains unsullied. A chromatically prominent element that breaks with its surroundings is the spark of the welding torch, which also corresponds to the centre of the scene. In this way, it is among the first elements the eye perceives, communicating to the viewer the primary information of the depicted scene, namely the type of work being carried out in this shipyard. The caption reads: “Women shipyard welders.” As in D-3, the caption intends to

describe rather than arguing. The welding torch, a tool heavily associated with industrial masculinity, strength, technical skill, and physical danger, is held by a woman as a matter of visual fact. As previously described, the poster does present it as ordinary. In doing so, it performs the same normalising operation as D-3. These two posters suggest that the redefinition of femininity in terms of productive participation and engagement is not limited to a single sector or type of activity, but extends it across a wide range of activities previously coded as exclusively male-oriented.



Figure 14: Zhang, Y. (1956).

Poster D-4: 造船厂的女焊工 [Female welders at the shipyard].

Source: Chinese posters.net.

The posters of this cluster therefore construct a comprehensive visual argument for the redefinition of femininity in terms of productive participation. On the surface, these representations celebrate genuine emancipation through images of women in factories, shipyards, agricultural fields, and military units, occupying spaces from which they had previously been excluded. Female participation in the public and productive sphere is normalized. The new femininity constructed here is defined by what the woman produces and how she contributes, and her emancipation is measured in terms of collective utility. An important distinction must be drawn, however, between the rhetorical strategies of this cluster and the role of exemplary women previously examined in Chapter 3.3b. There, the mechanism of persuasion operated through specificity. Hao Jianxiu, Liu Hulan, and Liang Jun were named, individualised, and biographically anchored figures. Their stories and achievements were known and documented. The women depicted in posters of this cluster, by contrast, operate through an opposite logic. The women represented in these cases are mostly anonymous and deliberately generic. They are not exceptional women who have distinguished themselves in their fields; they are ordinary women doing the right thing. It is precisely this ordinariness that constitutes their rhetorical force. The exemplary woman aims to inspire admiration and emulation, while the anonymous worker invites identification, as a figure that the viewer could be herself. Both strategies are complementary: either the viewer aspires to be like Liu Hulan or Hao Jianxiu, or she recognises herself in the unnamed worker, or aspires to be like her, she understands that in both cases she must actively engage in the nation building process. Both registers were employed simultaneously by the Party precisely for the totalising effect that their combination strived to produce, an effect that neither could have achieved individually. Similarly to what was analysed in section 3.3b, exemplary figures are once again presented here as models to be admired and emulated. However, in this case the models are not external to the subject, but internal to her,

activated by the reception of the Party's revolutionary values through the act of reading. In this case, ideological formation becomes more intimate. There are no external imperatives, but rather an internal vision as the content of the subject's own desires and aspirations, which the poster aims to elicit in the viewer.

4.6. Cluster 5: Gender and Generational Transmission

The final cluster suggests that the ideological project directed at women was not exclusively addressed to adult women. The formation of new socialist women was a process that began in childhood, before autonomous subjectivity and a consolidated system of values had taken root. The posters analysed in this cluster address progressively younger female subjects, ranging from young women to girls who are shaped by the values of the Party.

An exemplifying poster is poster E-3 (Figure 15). The composition depicts a group of male and female children in substantially equal proportion, gathered beneath an apple tree full of fruits. They are surrounded by domestic animals. The caption reads: “Ah! Another big apple!” While the composition includes subjects of both sexes, the female figures remain relevant to the present analysis, as their representation contributes to the broader understanding of the reconfiguration of gender roles promoted by Maoist visual culture. The ideological work is accomplished through visual abundance. The composition evokes the aesthetic of traditional *nianhua*, in which visual richness functioned as an auspicious index of prosperity. Here, that tradition is appropriated to associate the new socialist China with the idea of collective abundance and happiness, values that the poster aims to embody. Red dominates the scene, present in the apples, the clothing, and the general palette of the animals and objects, visually anchoring the composition to the chromatics of the revolution without resorting to explicit symbols. Particular attention should be paid to the apples, which occupy the uppermost register of the composition, positioned hierarchically above the children. Their elevation invites a reading in which natural abundance and prosperity are implicitly associated with the presence of the Party. This presence need not be made explicit to be felt. Much as the Party itself operates as an unseen force in the lives of its citizens, the laden branches overhead suggest a form of benevolent oversight, as the children flourish beneath them, unaware by the source of their abundance. At the centre of the

composition stands a young girl in a red dress whose traditional feminine clothing temporarily. This suggests that the masculinisation of the female figure that characterises the female iconography of the preceding clusters is temporarily suspended during childhood. Her femininity is not erased but rather reframed within a context of collective joy and socialist abundance. Furthermore, the children depicted are not passive subjects but are actively engaged with their surrounding environment, gathering apples, watering plants, and tending to animals. This active engagement with the natural world anticipates symbolically the future productive role of young socialist citizens, suggesting that participation and contribution are values to be instilled from the earliest stages of life.



Figure 15: Wei, Y. (1954).

Poster E-3: Ah! Another big apple!

Source: Chinese Propaganda Posters: From the Collection of Michael Wolf.

Poster E-6 (Figure 16) depicts two young women carrying mountain climbing equipment on their backs. Before them stretches a snow-capped mountain range. Their bodies are close together and both smile outward beyond the frame. The figures occupy the lower two thirds of the poster, while the snow-covered mountains occupy the upper third, functioning as the silent protagonist of the composition. On the interpretive plane, the composition constructs a vertical structure in which the young women occupy the lower register as physical bodies representing the real, while the mountain above implicitly indicates a destination, something great toward which they are striving. The instruments they carry appear to be topographic surveying rods, long and diagonal, projected upward and to the right, creating ascending vectors that extend the movement of their bodies toward the mountain. Cool and earthy colours dominate the scene, ranging from blue-grey to the brown of their suits and the grey-white of the mountains. The red sweater becomes the point of maximum chromatic attention, being the only saturated colour in the scene. The fact that two young women are alone in an apparently hostile mountain landscape, carrying heavy equipment and engaged in a technical mission, carries a strong ideological message. The two women are self-sufficient, both physically and technically. For a woman of that time, accustomed to being told that her body is unsuited to such hostile environments, this constitutes a renegotiation of her own physical identity beginning from a young age. A girl, therefore, has the possibility of becoming a strong woman, capable of confronting the difficulties that a mountain ascent entails, and thus of becoming a strong woman in the future. The caption reads: "Dedicate your youth to the Nation." On one level, this is a collectivist imperative, similar to cases already discussed in the preceding examples. On another level, however, it is also a message of emancipation. To dedicate oneself to the national project means, in fact, also having access to opportunities different from those to which women were accustomed, conveying an encouraging and aspirational message to young female viewers and generating a sense of

identification with the figures depicted. It is significant to note, however, that the poster suggests that youth should be dedicated to the nation rather than to oneself. Autonomy and emancipation are therefore granted in the service of a collective project, not as an individual right. Women are free to step outside established patterns, for instance by undertaking an arduous task such as the one depicted, but this freedom is extended because the nation requires someone to fulfil it.



Figure 16: Ruqiao, Z. (1954).

Poster E-6: 把青春献给祖国

[Dedicate your youth to the Nation].

Source: Chinese posters.net.

The poster that follow post-dates the core period of the Marriage Law campaign. Its inclusion is nonetheless justified by the thematic continuity it shares with the preceding material. The ideological project of forming the young socialist woman did not conclude with the Marriage Law campaign, but extended and evolved across the following decades, renewing its iconographic language while preserving its underlying logic. In poster E-5 (Figure 17) this continuity manifest through the figure of the inspired young woman, formed through the reading of revolutionary models and oriented toward their emulation. Here is depicted a girl at the centre of the image. She wears a white shirt and the red neckerchief of the Young Pioneers, that is to say the Party's youth organisation for children. Her gaze is directed upward, and her expression conveys pride and aspiration. The focal point of the composition is the book she holds in her hands, open and with its title clearly legible: "The Story of Lei Feng." Behind and above her, four figures emerge from a luminous background of red and yellow light, rendered in dynamic and visionary form. The bodies of the figures are in motion and their actions are recognisable as those of revolutionary models, among whom Lei Feng and Liu Hulan are identifiable. The caption reads: "Read revolutionary books, learn from revolutionary role models, and become successors to the revolutionary cause." Lei Feng 雷锋 (1940-1962) was a young soldier born in 1940 in Wangcheng, Hunan province. He came from a poor peasant family. Following the Communist liberation of 1949, he joined the Party's youth organisations. In January 1960, he was enlisted in a regiment stationed in Fushun and became a member of the Chinese Communist Party. Throughout his two years of service in the People's Liberation Army, Lei Feng distinguished himself through an unwavering dedication to others. He donated his savings to civilians and fellow soldiers in need, volunteered in public spaces during holidays, and helped passengers on trains during official trips. As a military driver, he mastered both driving and vehicle repair techniques, becoming a reliable point of reference within his unit (Li W. , 2022).

Lei Feng became one of the most celebrated moral models in Maoist China for his frugal and modest lifestyle, refusing any form of personal privilege. Mao Zedong himself elevated him as the supreme embodiment of socialist virtue. Later in 1963, the People's Daily published Mao's inscription: "Learn from Comrade Lei Feng", officially launching a nationwide campaign to emulate the young soldier's example (Simone, 2012; Pelley, 2022). As regards the visual elements, the red neckerchief carries the symbolic meaning of Maoist thought. As the emblem of the Young Pioneers, it functions as a marker of institutional belonging. To wear it means carrying the revolution on one's body, making visible one's membership of and commitment to the revolutionary cause. The book functions as an ideological tool, as a medium through which exemplary figures of the revolutionary cause are made present and vivid to the young reader. The caption reinforces this logic, as reading leads to learning, and learning leads to becoming. The act of reading, and therefore the assimilation of the revolutionary values promoted by the Party, functions as an aspiration for young women, guiding them toward becoming adult women actively engaged in the revolution, just as the models presented to them have been.



Figure 17: Mo, S. (1974).

Poster E-5: 读革命书, 学革命人, 当革命接班人

[Read revolutionary books, learn from revolutionary people, become successors to the revolution].

Source: *Chinese Propaganda Posters: From the Collection of Michael Wolf*.

Results

This chapter presents the major findings obtained from the analysis of the corpus. The results move from the more empirically grounded dimensions of the analysis toward its more interpretative and theoretical implications. This choice responds to the need to establish a solid quantitative foundation before proceeding to the identification of the broader visual and ideological patterns that emerge from the corpus.

Contexts of Female Representation

With respect to the contexts of female representation, each poster was classified according to the three categories outlined in the Methods Chapter: non-conventional, conventional, and neutral. The data emerging from this classification confirm the dominant tendency of the Party's visual programme. The collected data are synthesised in the chart reproduced below (Figure 18).

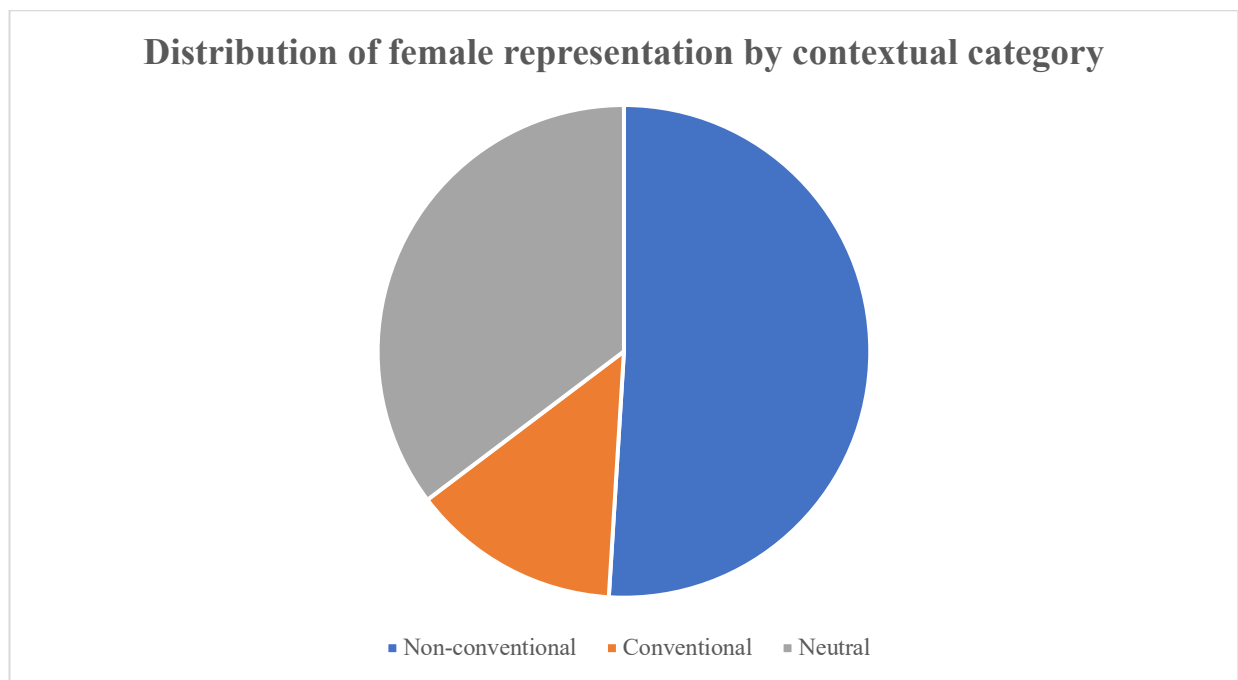


Figure 18

Distribution of female representation by contextual category

Out of 51 posters, the majority, corresponding to approximately 52% of the total, represents women in non-conventional contexts. 36% of the posters adopt a neutral register, in which the woman is depicted in neutral environments or against neutral backgrounds such as natural landscapes or, at times, even monochromatic ones. It is nonetheless significant that, even within this category, women are often represented in public contexts such as offices or public spaces. A particularly telling finding is that only 12% of the posters place the female figure in an explicitly conventional context. While the methodological caution imposed by the size of the corpus must be maintained, these data suggest a directional tendency in which the dominant representation of women in Maoist visual propaganda was not the domestic and subordinate figure of tradition, but that of a subject actively engaged in the public, productive, and political life of the new socialist system.

A further subdivision of the data was conducted for each individual cluster. The cluster-level analyses are synthesised in the chart reproduced below (Figure 19).

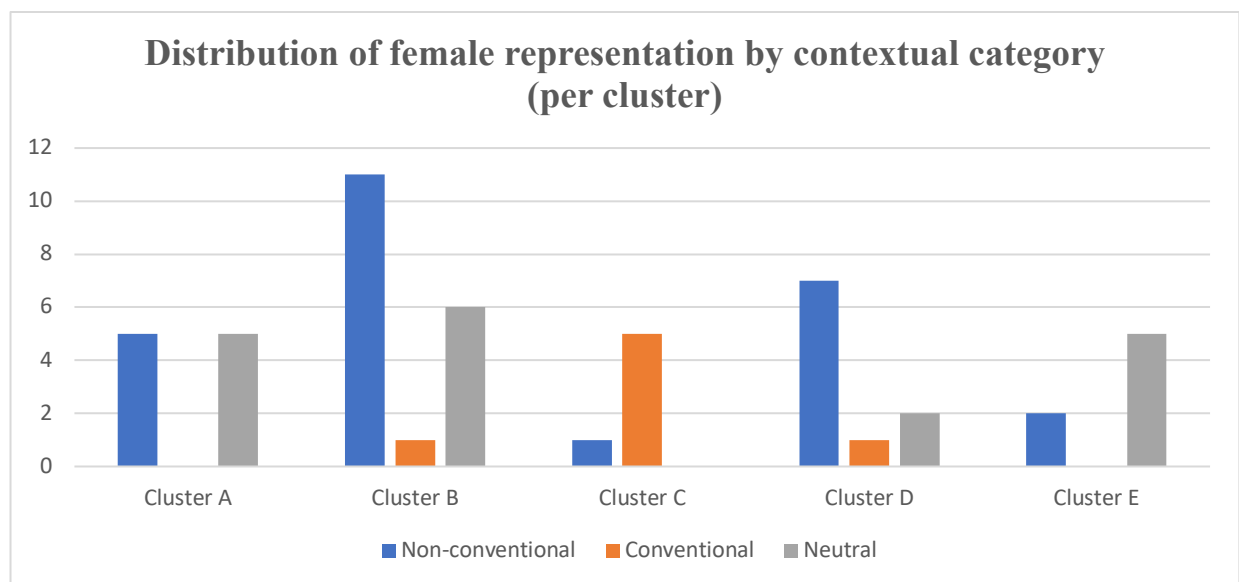


Figure 19
Distribution of female representation by contextual category (per cluster)

In Cluster A, representations are distributed between non-conventional and neutral, with no conventional representations present. Cluster B presents the highest concentration of representations in the entire corpus, totalling twelve, with a significant number of neutral representations, amounting to six; here too, conventional representations are absent. Cluster C is the only cluster in which conventional representations constitute the majority category, totalling five, with a marginal presence of neutral and non-conventional ones. Cluster D is dominated by non-conventional and neutral representations. Finally, Cluster E presents predominantly neutral representations. Observing the trend across clusters, non-conventional representations prove to be the most recurrent category in three out of five clusters, namely B, D, and A, while conventional representations are dominant exclusively in cluster C.

Emotional Registers

The distribution of emotional registers reveals the predominance of the *joy/xingfu* category as the most recurrent emotion, accounting for more than half of all occurrences. This is followed by the emotion of pride, which covers approximately one quarter of the corpus. The remaining categories are all present only marginally. A particularly significant finding for analytical purposes is the complete absence of negative emotions within the corpus. Despite certain narratives represented in the posters, such as those relating to the martyrdom of Liu Hulan, which might have justified their presence, this choice does not seem to have been made. Similarly to the analysis of the contexts in which women were represented described previously (see *Contexts of Female Representation* section above), a further subdivision of the data was conducted for each individual cluster. The data are synthesised in the charts reproduced below (Figure 20 and Figure 21).

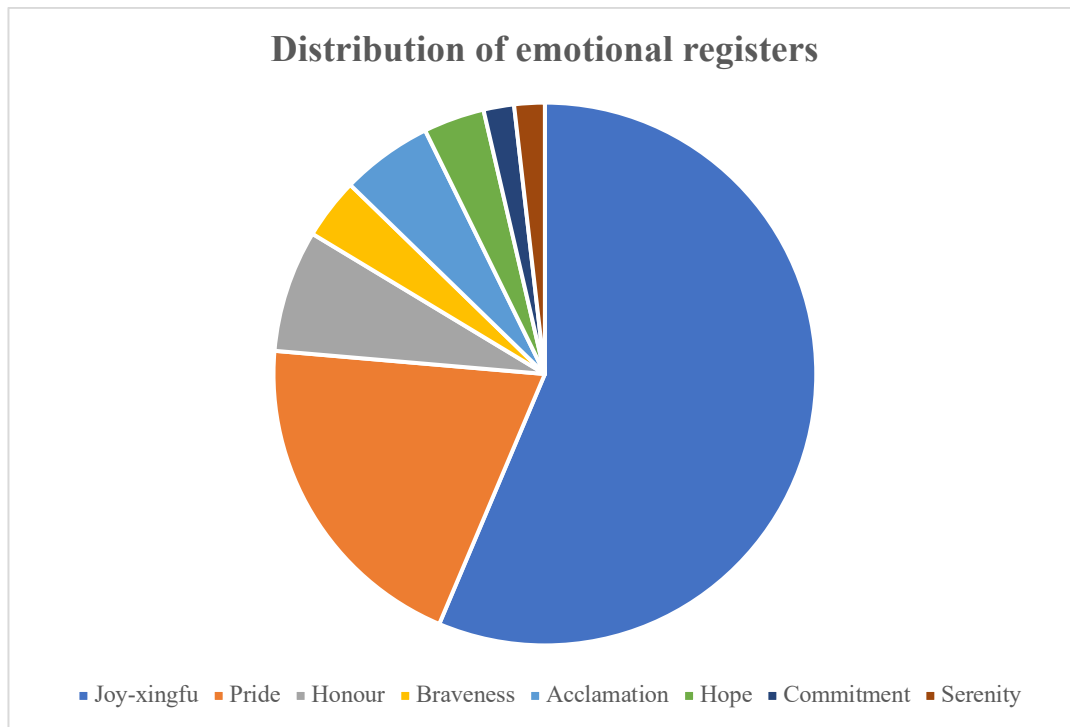


Figure 20
Distribution of emotional registers

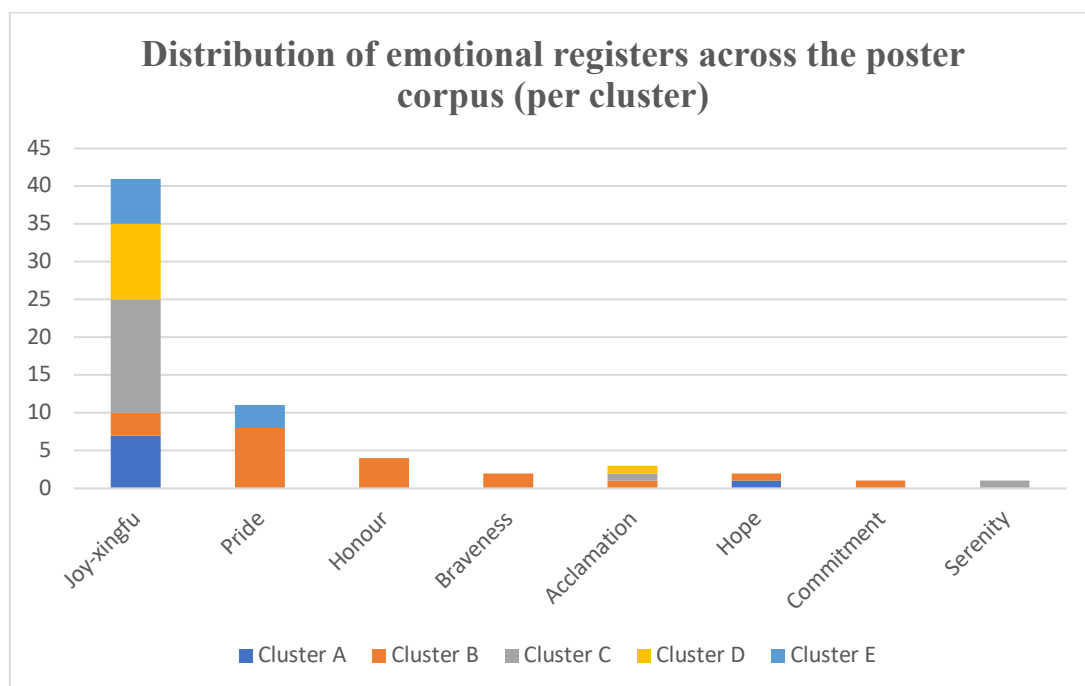


Figure 21
Distribution of emotional registers (per cluster)

The emotion of joy/*xingfu* remains the dominant emotion across all clusters. It is present in significant numbers in Cluster C, with approximately fifteen occurrences, and in Cluster D, with ten, while in Clusters A, B, and E it appears in more limited measure. The second most recurrent category is the emotion of pride, with approximately eleven total occurrences, concentrated predominantly in Clusters B and E. The remaining categories present very limited occurrences. A notable finding is that Cluster B is the only one in which diversified emotional registers appear, while the other clusters show an almost exclusive concentration of joy/*xingfu*.

Pathosformeln

The Pathosformeln identified with the greatest frequency in the corpus are traceable to three principal formulas: the expression of joy, active labour, and the proud gaze toward the horizon. The smile and joyful expression are directly linked to the dominance of joy/*xingfu* in the emotional registers and appear consistently across the corpus. The posture of active labour is recognisable through tools held in the hands, outstretched arms, and bodies leaning toward action. This recurs predominantly in Clusters B and D, that is to say in the contexts in which women are represented as productive and revolutionary subjects. Finally, the gaze directed toward the horizon or upward recurs in Clusters A and B, often accompanied by complementary graphic elements such as the sun or a path stretching into the distance. A significant finding is the complete absence in the corpus of Pathosformeln associated with negative emotions. The corpus appears to operate exclusively through positive affective formulas, with enthusiasm and joy constituting the dominant registers, while fear and anger are systematically absent. This choice proves consistent with the overall strategy of the corpus, which appears oriented toward normalisation and aspiration.

Use of Named and Anonymous Female Figures

With respect to the identification of the female figures, each poster was classified according to the three categories outlined in the Methods Chapter: *named*, *anonymous*, and *undefined*; the latter refers to figures who remain iconographically recognisable, as in the case of the statue of Liu Hulan (B-15, B-16), without being explicitly named. The collected data are synthesised in the charts reproduced below (Figure 22 and Figure 23), referring respectively to the corpus as a whole and to its subdivision by cluster. The distribution across the total corpus reveals a marked predominance of anonymous figures, which constitute the majority category. The disaggregation by cluster shows that named figures are concentrated exclusively in Cluster B, a finding that is predictable given the nature of the cluster, which aims to group together all those posters depicting specific figures who distinguished themselves through social, civic, or moral qualities. In all other clusters, the female figures are exclusively, or almost exclusively, anonymous. The “undefined” category appears marginally in Clusters B and E.

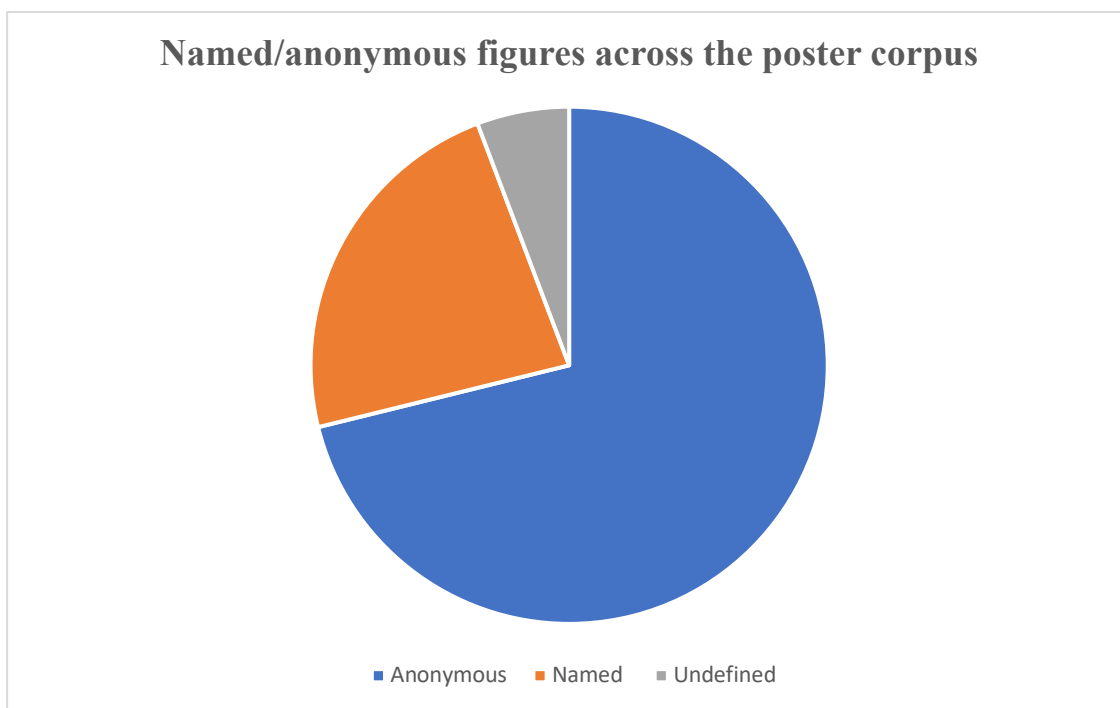


Figure 22

Named/anonymous figures across the poster corpus

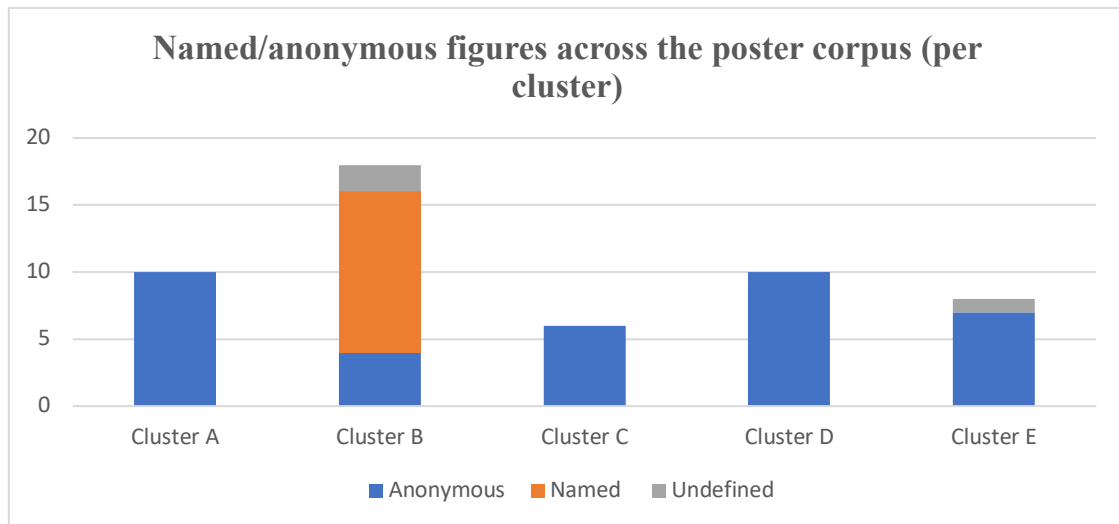


Figure 23
Named/anonymous figures across the poster corpus (per cluster)

Primary Communicative Objectives

In order to identify the mobilisation strategies employed in the corpus, the primary communicative objective of each poster was recorded, that is to say what the poster appeared to intend to provoke in the viewer. For each poster, the category deemed most representative of the dominant communicative objective was assigned. In some cases, the primary communicative objective appeared ambiguous, and two categories were therefore recorded. The collected data were subsequently analysed by cluster first, and overall thereafter. The aforementioned data are synthesised in the charts reproduced below (Figure 24 and Figure 25).

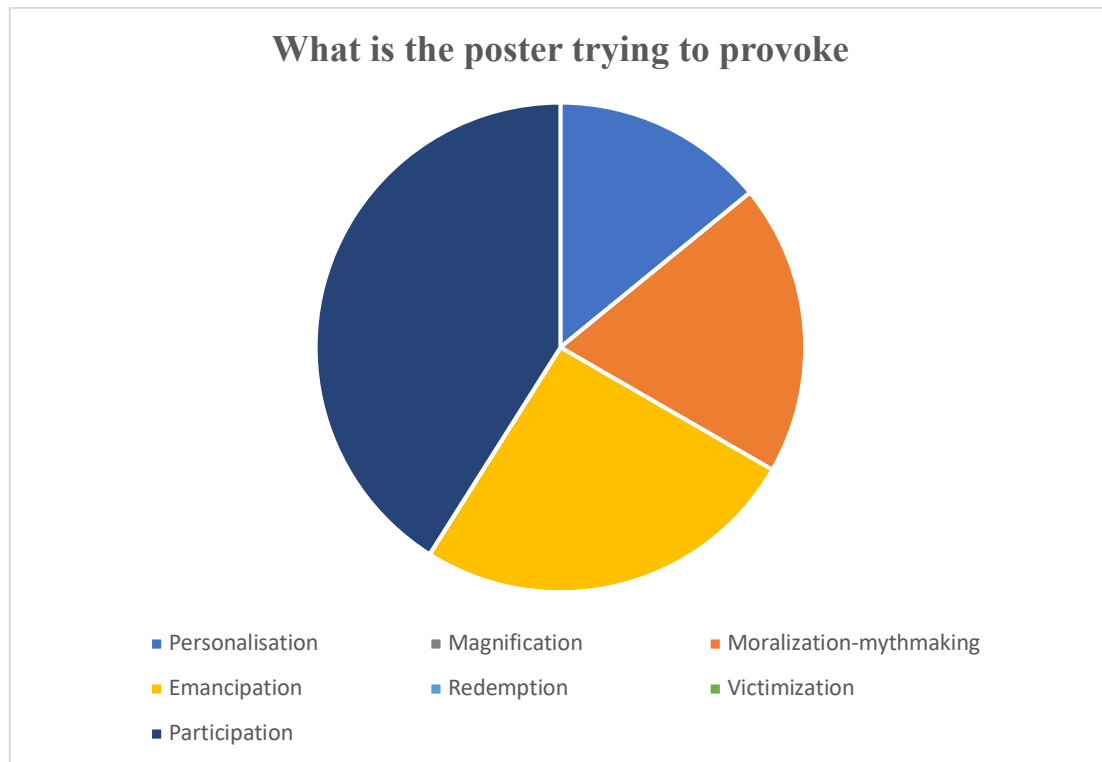


Figure 24
What is the poster trying to provoke

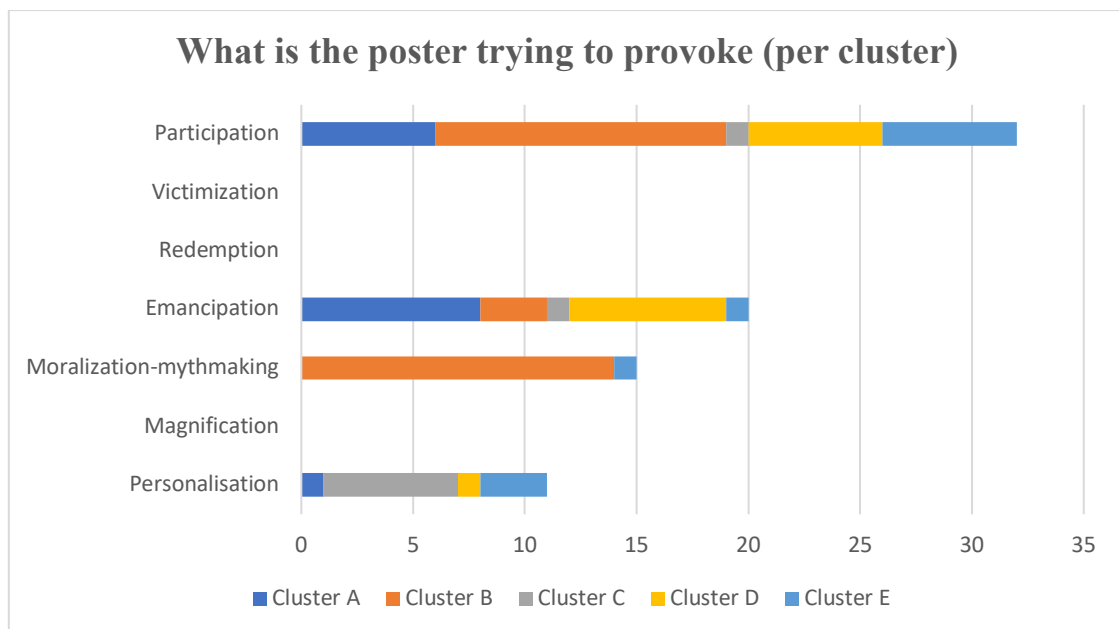


Figure 25
What is the poster trying to provoke (per cluster)

The distribution of the mobilisation strategies identified in the corpus reveals a marked predominance of the categories “participation” and “emancipation”. “Participation” constitutes the most recurrent category in the entire corpus, with 32 total occurrences, distributed across all clusters. “Emancipation” occupies the second position with 20 occurrences, concentrating its presence in Clusters A, B, and D. The categories “victimization”, “redemption”, and “magnification” are absent from the entire corpus, registering no occurrences. A particularly significant finding is the distribution of “participation”, which proves to be the dominant category in all clusters, suggesting that it constitutes the transversal strategy of the entire corpus. “Participation” is present in all five clusters, with a particular concentration in Cluster B, with 13 occurrences, and in Cluster D, with 6 occurrences. “Emancipation” is distributed between Clusters A, with 7 occurrences, and D, with 8 occurrences, which constitute its primary sites; a lesser presence is recorded in Cluster B, with 2 occurrences, and a marginal one in Cluster C. “Moralization-mythmaking” is concentrated almost exclusively in Cluster B, which accounts for nearly all of its occurrences. “Personalisation” is distributed among Clusters C, E, and A, with a marginal presence in Cluster D. The categories “victimization”, “redemption”, and “magnification”, as previously noted, are absent across all clusters.

Graphic Elements

For analytical purposes, it was deemed useful to identify the salient and recurrent graphic elements within the corpus. For each poster, the principal graphic elements were recorded, comprising objects, tools, natural elements, recurring figures, and similar visual components. In a second stage, the identified elements were grouped into comprehensive thematic categories, taking into account their semantic affinity and symbolic function. For example, elements such as the tractor, the welding torch, and the train were grouped under the same category, as they share the same symbolic reference to productive and industrial progress. The analysis identified the

following categories: “technological and industrial progress”, “party connection”, “military”, “agricultural labour”, “natural abundance”, “bright future”, “patriotic elements”, and “book/knowledge transmission”. The data obtained are synthesised in the chart reproduced below (Figure 26).

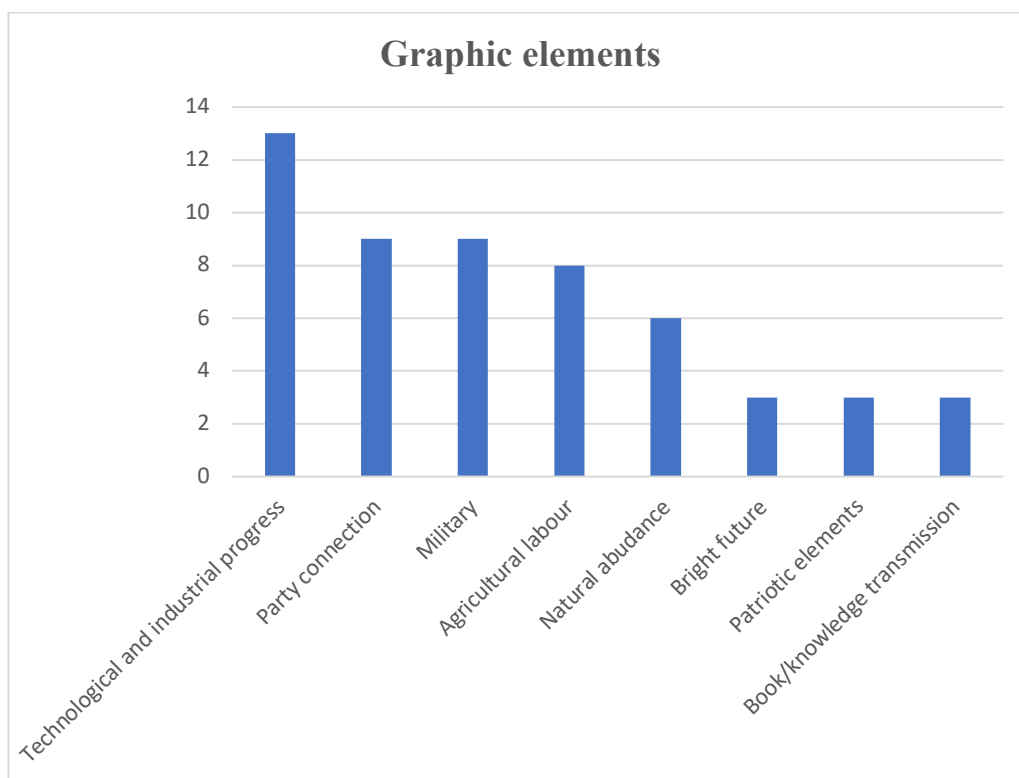


Figure 26
Graphic elements

The identified graphic elements show a predominance of the category “technological and industrial progress”, present in 13 occurrences. “Party connection” and “military” follow with 9 occurrences each. “Agricultural labour” follows with 8 occurrences.

Dominant Chromatic Registers

In order to analyse the use of colour in the corpus, the dominant colours of each poster were recorded, with the aim of identifying the predominant colours in the overall composition. In a second stage, the occurrences thus recorded were aggregated by colour across the entire corpus, making it possible to identify which chromatic palettes recur with the greatest frequency

in the visual material examined. The distribution of dominant colours reveals a predominance of red, present in 26 occurrences, corresponding to approximately half of the total corpus and distributed across all five clusters. Pink and green follow with 16 occurrences each, while blue registers 14 occurrences. Yellow and white follow with 11 occurrences each, and finally brown with 8. A significant finding is the near absence of dark colours, with only 2 occurrences of black and 1 of grey.

Mao's presence

The presence of Mao in the corpus was recorded predominantly in the form of the hanging portrait, that is to say the physical image of Mao placed within the depicted scene. A particularly significant finding concerns the position of the portrait in the posters in which it appears, namely in an elevated position above all other figures in the composition, occupying the hierarchically highest register of the scene. The figures represented in its proximity vary, including citizens of all ages, young caregivers, children, and happy families. In terms of distribution by cluster, Mao's portrait is concentrated predominantly in Cluster C.

Homeworld

The construction of the Homeworld does not constitute an isolated datum identifiable within the analytical process, but rather emerges from the transversal convergence of multiple elements. Its identification in the corpus therefore requires a cross-sectional reading of the data, focused on the recurring patterns that jointly contribute to the definition of a shared space and a system of values presented as common. The application of the concept to the corpus is justified precisely by the convergence of several data points, as it constitutes a pattern that emerges from the repetition of similar visual elements across different clusters and posters. The coherence of the chromatic palette, the recurrence of similar spaces, the consistency of positive emotional registers, and the pervasive presence of elements traceable to the Party are not characteristics

identifiable in individual posters, but structural properties of the corpus as a whole. In terms of the contexts of representation, female figures are placed predominantly in recognisable spaces belonging to socialist everyday life, such as factories, agricultural fields, schools, care environments, and domestic settings. These spaces recur consistently across the clusters and contribute to defining the places within which the life of the female subject is normalised. On the level of the visual landscape, the most recurrent graphic elements in the corpus constitute a coherent and systematic image of the socialist everyday, as examined in the paragraph above, in which productive labour and collective prosperity constitute the structuring elements. The affective atmosphere is defined by the use of a chromatic palette dominated by vivid and warm colours, and by the near total absence of dark colours. This choice is accompanied by predominantly positive emotional registers, with joy/*xingfu* as the dominant emotion, as examined in the paragraph above, contributing to the construction of a uniform affective norm across the corpus. Finally, the normalisation of the Party's presence constitutes one of the most transversal elements within the corpus. This manifests through various forms, both explicit and implicit. Examples include the portrait of Mao, as examined in the paragraph above on Mao's presence within the corpus, but also the colour red, present in 26 posters, as well as elements such as the flag, the red ribbon, and the red neckerchief. The distribution of these elements across all five clusters indicates that the Party's presence is not concentrated in specific thematic contexts, but permeates the corpus transversally as a constitutive element of the everyday visual landscape.

Discussion

Panoramic Overview

The analysis conducted throughout the Chapters of this thesis has traced a framework in which propaganda theory, the project of female emancipation, and visual production are intertwined, converging toward a unified ideological logic. Far from constituting the irrational and threatening crowd feared by Le Bon (1895/2025) and Sighele (1908/2022), the masses in the Maoist context represented a force of progress and historical transformation whose collective energy carried within itself the potential for social change. This potential, however, required guidance, orientation, and protection from the risk that its own force might become destructive rather than constructive. In this setting, propaganda is not a simple instrument of mass control, but a semi-science rooted in the understanding of deep psychological mechanisms and human desires and fears. It thus becomes an instrument through which the Party sought to orient behaviours and construct shared values. This was not a coercive operation in the strict sense, but a process of internalisation of norms and models of conduct deemed desirable, operating simultaneously on the cognitive, emotional, and aesthetic planes. What characterizes Maoist propaganda is its profound cultural hybridity. Far from being a mechanical importation of foreign models, it was a system rooted in the Confucian educational tradition, in the recourse to exemplary figures, and in a familiarity with a popular aesthetic. As documented by Landsberger (2020) and Pan (2014), and further confirmed by the examples analysed throughout the corpus, Maoist visual propaganda was inspired by traditional art forms such as *nianhua*, while simultaneously integrating elements drawn from external sources, including mass agitation and the cult of personality (see Chapter 1). As already argued by Zuo (1991), the result was an ideological apparatus of an almost religious nature, capable of permeating every aspect of daily life and operating across multiple registers (Zuo, 1991, pp. 100-101). Propaganda posters were among the most visible vehicles

through which this apparatus circulated within the spaces of ordinary life, constructing what may be defined as a shared *Homeworld*. The posters were accessible, visually immediate, emotionally powerful, and strategically placed within the spaces of ordinary life, thus capable of creating a horizon of values within which citizens were called to recognise and identify themselves. It is within this system that the question of female emancipation must be understood. With reference to the framework of the concepts of “Homeworld” and “Alienworld”, Ranta (2020) describes the way in which societies construct models of their own culture in contrast with what is foreign to it. The Homeworld designates the community of subjects who share a common system of values and meanings that defines what is normal; the Alienworld, by contrast, encompasses everything that diverges from this and is considered abnormal, distant from a standard of normality and acceptability (Ranta, 2020, p. 3). Within this logic, the construction of the Homeworld presupposes the existence of an explicit Alienworld that defines its contours through contrast, whether in the form of a class enemy, the feudal past, bourgeois or imperialist influence, and so forth. The analysis of the corpus introduces, however, an important qualification with respect to this framework. The Alienworld appears to be completely absent, at least from an explicit visual and graphic standpoint. The corpus constructs the Homeworld not through contrast with its opposite, but through a positive saturation of the visual space. The images are filled with smiling figures, productive spaces, positive emotional registers, and vivid chromatic choices. This strategy differs from that described by Ranta (2020), and suggests that Maoist visual propaganda directed at women emancipation operated through a logic of inclusion. In this way, a model of subjectivity already presented as real is normalised and rendered desirable, implicitly suggesting that its absence, that is to say the failure to align with the values and behaviours presented as natural, would amount to an exclusion from the visual world constructed by the poster. The Alienworld, in other words, does not disappear but is displaced off-frame and evoked through

negation. A subject who does not smile, who does not participate, and who does not find joy in doing so, places themselves automatically outside the only model presented as normal and shared.

Normalisation

The analysis of the selected poster corpus has also made it possible to identify the concrete visual strategies through which this model was rendered legible, desirable, and accessible. Observing at the data collected (see Results Chapter), what emerges is the existence of a coherent logic of ideological interpellation, articulated across multiple levels and capable of operating simultaneously through different registers. The first and most pervasive mechanism is that of normalisation. The corpus does not present the new socialist female model as a future ideological proposition, but as a reality already inhabited and visually familiar in everyday life. As examined in the previous chapter, the predominance of non-conventional representations suggests that this constitutes a rhetorical strategy through which the presence of women in historically male contexts is rendered recurrent and visually self-evident. This finding acquires further significance when considered alongside the most recurrent graphic elements in the corpus, which belong mainly to the thematic nucleus of technological and industrial progress, agricultural labour, and the military context. Taken together, these construct the dominant visual landscape, systematically placing female figures in productive and public environments. Contexts such as the factory, the field, and the army are represented as natural environments commonly inhabited by women. In this sense, the poster aims to construct a reality in which an ideological proposition is transformed into an already accomplished fact.

Emancipation and Discipline

Strictly connected to normalisation is the structural tension between emancipation and discipline. The corpus opens real symbolic and material spaces for women, rendering them visible in historically male contexts, celebrating their capabilities, and naming them as historical

subjects. However, the terms of this emancipation are entirely defined by the ideological constraints of the Party. This tension emerges with particular clarity in the distribution of primary communicative objectives. Participation constitutes the dominant category with approximately 30 occurrences, distributed transversally across all five clusters, followed by emancipation with 20 occurrences. It is also significant that emancipation is almost always accompanied by an invitation to collective participation. The co-presence of these two categories reveals that liberation from the traditional domestic sphere does not coincide with individual freedom in the proper sense, but with a reintegration into a new form of collective discipline. This becomes a foundational propagandistic mechanism, precisely because the emancipation is real in its content, the discipline that accompanies it becomes acceptable and even desirable. In the study carried by Liu Y. (2010), upon which the present research has drawn for the identification of mobilisation patterns, the patterns of victimisation, redemption, and emancipation are identified, each oriented toward a specific affective register (Liu, 2010, p. 332). This framework, elaborated predominantly from textual and discursive sources and only partially attending to the visual dimension of propaganda, finds in the visual corpus examined a partial confirmation that nonetheless requires significant qualification. The distribution of communicative objectives in the posters shows that “participation” constitutes the clearly dominant category, with approximately thirty occurrences distributed transversally across all five clusters, followed by emancipation. “Victimisation” and “redemption”, by contrast, are entirely absent. This finding suggests that visual propaganda, or at least that directed at women with an emancipatory objective, operated through a more restricted and positive emotional register than the model proposed by Liu Y. (2010) would lead one to expect.

Affective Construction of Consent

The posters appear to construct an affective universe almost entirely devoid of conflict, in which adherence to the socialist project is presented not as a response to a threat or a form of guilt, with reference to the emotional registers of victimisation and redemption, but as the natural expression of a desire already present within the subject. The third theme is the affective construction of consent. The corpus operates almost exclusively through positive emotional registers. The analysis of emotional registers reveals that “joy/*xingfu*” dominates the emotional occurrences, followed by pride; negative emotions such as fear or anger are absent from the entire corpus. As products of the official propaganda, the posters represent the situations, roles and model of conduct that the Party intended to promote among women. The fact that these situations are systematically associated with positive emotional registers, and negative emotions entirely absent from the corpus, reinforces an explicit equation between adherence to the model promoted by the Party and happiness. The smile of women in the posters is therefore not an expression of private contentment, but a sign of political alignment, an explicit demonstration of the successful internalisation of socialist values that have generated these emotions in the subject, ceasing to be an interior condition and becoming a collective duty. This reading is corroborated by the chromatic palette of the corpus. The dominant colours are predominantly warm and vivid. Red stands out, a colour conventionally associated with vitality and good fortune, present in 26 posters, followed by pink, yellow, and green. It is important to notice that white, though present in 11 occurrences, does not carry here the connotation of mourning it holds in the broader Chinese symbolic repertoire (see Methods Chapter). Its occurrences are concentrated in functional elements, such as work uniforms, aprons, backgrounds, rather than in symbolically weighted focal points of the composition, and should therefore not be read as a destabilising presence within the corpus’ otherwise auspicious chromatic register. Taken as a whole, the dominance of

this warm palette tends, on the affective level, to produce in the viewer sensations of vitality, warmth, proximity, optimism, and abundance. The effect is that of a visual atmosphere communicating plenty. Consistent with this logic, dark colours, typically associated with negative emotional states, register very few occurrences. Furthermore, particular attention should be given to red, which operates not only as a warm colour in the affective sense, but also carries with it a stratification of culturally coded meanings. In the revolutionary context, it is the colour of the Party and of the revolution. Its pervasiveness in the corpus, present in more than half of all occurrences, therefore suggests that it activates positive emotional responses while simultaneously anchoring them to responses tied to the political identity of the regime.

Employment of Pathosformeln

With reference to the concept of Pathosformeln as articulated by Egea Medrano, Garrido Rubia, and Rojo Martinez (2021), enthusiasm, fear, and anger are identified as the politically most powerful emotions most frequently activated in visual propaganda, as they are capable of orienting political behaviour through the surveillance and dispositional emotional systems (Egea Medrano, Garrido Rubia, & Rojo Martinez, 2021, p. 224). In the corpus examined, however, only one of these three emotions appears to be present, namely enthusiasm, embodied by joy/*xingfu*. Fear and anger are absent, despite the fact that certain narratives within the corpus might have justified their presence, such as those relating to the martyrdom of Liu Hulan. This finding suggests that visual propaganda directed at women's emancipation selectively activated only a portion of the emotional repertoire identified in the literature, specifically that oriented toward the dispositional system through enthusiasm, hope, and positive identification. The analysis of the corpus therefore adds an empirical qualification to the framework of Egea Medrano et al. (2021), namely that Pathosformeln are not deployed indiscriminately, but are selected according to the intended audience and the message to be conveyed.

Ideological Pervasiveness

A further dimension is ideological pervasiveness. The presence of the Party is not circumscribed solely to those posters in which Mao's portrait appears explicitly, but permeates the corpus transversally through chromatic and symbolic elements distributed across all five clusters, examples of which include the red ribbon, the neckerchief, and the flag. Party connection constitutes, moreover, the second most recurrent graphic category in the corpus, as examined in the previous chapter (see Results Chapter, *Graphic Elements* section). These elements operate below the threshold of conscious decoding, rendering the Party's presence a constitutive and naturalised part of the visual landscape. It is in this sense that the poster realises its deepest ideological operation, not through the explicit imposition of a message, but through the construction of a Homeworld in which the values of the Party appear inscribed in the fabric of everyday life.

Artist Cadre

Ideological pervasiveness does not exhaust its reach in the final visual product. It extends back to the very conditions of production of the poster. As examined in the analysis of the artist's condition (see Chapter 3), the artist was not a subject external to the ideological system they represented, but was themselves formed by that system. Through the process of *fanxin* described by Cheung (2007), i.e., the transformation of thought required of every socialist subject (Cheung, 2007, p. 10), the artist was called to internalise the values that the images were meant to transmit, before being able to represent them. The propagandistic system thus proves to be structurally closed and self-referential. The images of the happy, socially productive, and politically aligned socialist woman were produced by subjects who intended to promote those very images in their recipients. The distinction between the producer and the recipient of the propagandistic message

therefore dissolves in a system in which all subjects involved, whether artists, functionaries, or viewers, are simultaneously agents and objects of the same logic of ideological transformation.

Conclusion and Future Development

On the historiographical plane, this thesis positions itself at the intersection of two fields of research that have rarely engaged directly with one another, namely studies on Maoist visual propaganda and gender studies on socialist China. While the existing literature has examined separately the mechanisms of mass propaganda and the condition of women in revolutionary China, the systematic visual analysis of posters as a site of construction of female subjectivity represents a contribution that remains partially unexplored. The integrated application of tools drawn from propaganda theory, semiotics, and gender studies has made it possible to demonstrate that the poster was not simply a vehicle for messages, but an active device for the production of subjectivity, capable of operating on the cognitive, emotional, and identity planes. Three main findings emerge from the analysis. On the plane of mass mobilisation, the analysis shows that the poster operated through a logic of positive inclusion rather than conflictual exclusion, constructing consent through the desire for belonging rather than through fear of an enemy. On the emotional plane, the findings specify that *Pathosformeln* were not deployed indiscriminately, but was selected according to the intended audience. Visual propaganda directed at female emancipation activated exclusively enthusiasm, joy/*xingfu*, identification, and fulfilment, thereby integrating and partially correcting frameworks such as that of Liu Y. (2010), developed predominantly from textual sources. On the plane of emancipation, finally, the research demonstrates how the structural tension between emancipation and discipline, already identified by the historiography on gender in China, translated into systematic visual choices, revealing that the poster did not merely reflect this tension but actively produced it, constructing a model of socialist femininity in which freedom and control are rendered visually almost indistinguishable.

However, the present research has presented a few limitations. These reside primarily in the size of the corpus, which, despite its internal coherence, does not permit definitive generalisations, and in its predominant concentration around the period of the Marriage Law campaign of 1950. Future developments could extend the analysis in a diachronic direction, examining the successive phases of the history of the PRC, or in a comparative direction, placing the visual strategies identified in dialogue with those of other socialist contexts in which analogous processes of construction of female subjectivity through visual propaganda have been documented.

What the overall analysis reveals is therefore a structural tension running through the entire Maoist ideological project directed at women. On one hand, the propaganda opens real spaces, rendering women visible in historically male contexts, celebrating their capabilities, and naming them as historical subjects. On the other hand, the terms of this emancipation are entirely defined by the Party, and the formation of this subjectivity concerns women of all generations. As emerges from the analysis of the posters dedicated to progressively younger subjects, the process of ideological shaping begins in childhood, before an autonomous identity and a personal system of values have had the opportunity to take form. On the cognitive plane, the recurrence of non-conventional female figures normalises new gender roles, rendering them visually familiar. On the emotional level, the activation of positive *Pathosformeln*, in particular through the register of joy/*xingfu* and enthusiasm, aims to generate affective responses that disposed the recipient toward identification and acceptance. On the rhetorical level, the combined registers of personalisation, magnification, and emancipation addressed simultaneously different subject positions, ensuring that the ideological message reached its audience through multiple channels. The construction of a recognisable Homeworld, composed of familiar and everyday environments, provides the visual and affective context within which the aforementioned

strategies operated, dissolving the perceived distance between the ideological proposition and the lived reality of the recipient. Taken as a whole, it is possible to affirm that these strategies produce a coherent visual system, capable of constructing and naturalising a new model of socialist femininity characterised by a woman who is juridically equal, economically productive, aesthetically de-gendered, morally exemplary, politically conscious, and visibly and explicitly happy. The co-presence and coherence of these traits, never isolated but almost always presented as an integrated system, is what renders this model what the new socialist China presented as the new, and only possible, form of femininity.

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Appendix 1: Poster Corpus

A – Marriage



Poster A-1: Yunjie, Y. (1953).

自由婚姻美满幸福 [Freedom of marriage, happiness and prosperity].

Source: Chinese-posters.net



Poster A-2: Bi, C. (1953).

独立自主结婚好，团结生产幸福多

[Free-choice marriage is good;
collective production brings
happiness].

Source: Chinese-posters.net



Poster A-3: Li, W., & Fu, X. (1955).

美满婚姻，幸福家庭 [Happy marriage, happy family].

Source: Chinese-posters.net.



Poster A-4: Wu, D. (1953).

婚姻自己作主張登記回來喜洋洋

[Take charge of your own marriage and return joyfully after registration].

Source: Chinese posters.net.



Poster A-5: Lei, Z. (1950).

結婚登記 [Marriage registration].

Source: Chinese posters.net.



晚婚好处多

Poster A-6: Anonymous. (1975).

晚婚好处多 [Late marriage has many advantages].

Source: Chinese-posters.net.



青年们 为革命实行晚婚

Poster A-7: Linfen County Cultural Center. (1974).

青年们为革命实行晚婚

[Young people, practice late marriage for the revolution].

Source: Chinese-posters.net.



Poster A-8: Unknown. (1965).

积极响应党的号召提倡适龄结婚把青春
献给伟大的社会主义革命和建设事业

[Actively respond to the Party's call,
advocate marriage at the appropriate age,
and dedicate youth to the great socialist
revolutionary and construction cause].

Source: Chineseposters.net.



Poster A-9: Unknown. (1960?).

为革命实行晚婚 [Practice late marriage for the revolution].

Source: Chinese posters.net.



Poster A-10:

Sha (1950)

拥护婚姻法

[Support the Marriage Law]

Source: Chinese posters.net.

B – Exemplary women



Poster B-1: Dong, T. (1953).

党的好女儿赵桂兰 [The Party's good daughter Zhao Guilan].

Source: Chinese posters.net.



Poster B-2: Dong, T. (1953).

第一个女拖拉机手梁军 [The first female tractor driver Liang Jun].

Source: Chinese posters.net.



女戰鬥英雄涂勳 共產黨員，先後參加過十七次戰鬥，被選為黨的戰鬥英雄，一次抗戰運動中，又被選為勞動模範，一九五〇年曾應邀出席全國戰鬥英雄代表會議。

圖：張中健（上海）繪
出版：上海人民美術出版社
1953年11月（第1版） 16開 128頁 定價：0.15元

608

印刷：上海印刷印刷廠
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1953年11月（第1版） 16開 128頁 定價：0.15元

chinese posters . net

Poster B-3: Dong, T. (1953).

女战斗英雄涂勋 [Female combat hero Tu Xun].

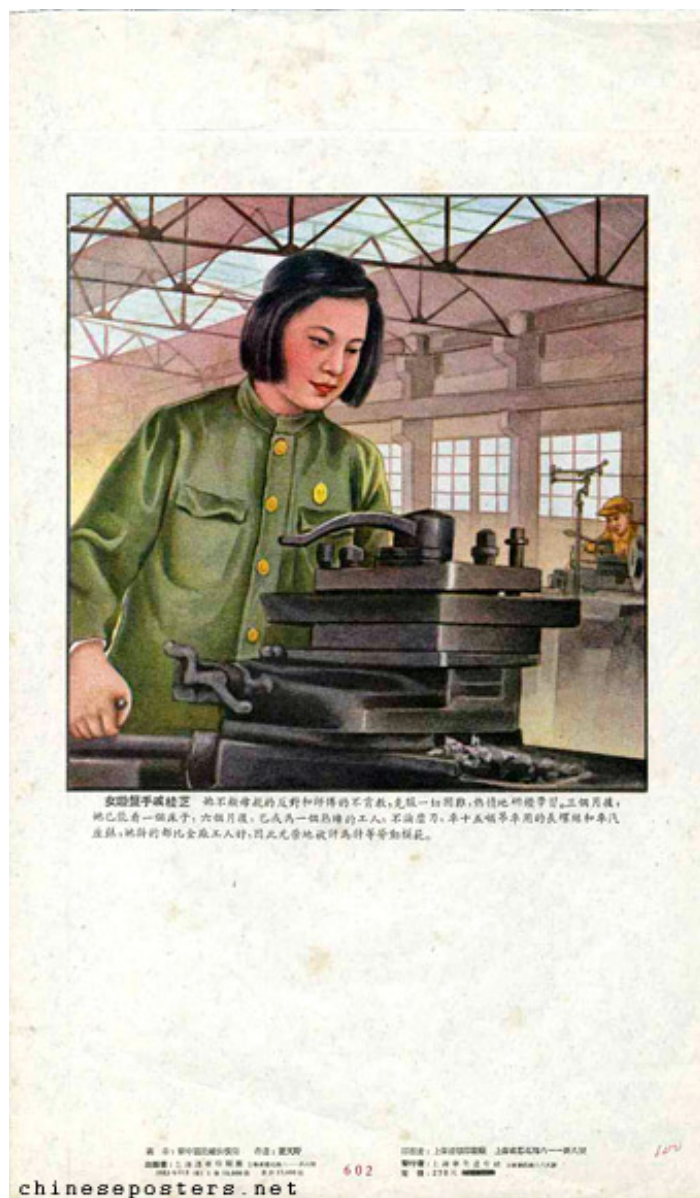
Source: Chinese posters . net.



Poster B-4: Dong, T. (1953).

特等女战斗英雄郭俊卿 [Special-class female
combat hero Guo Junqing].

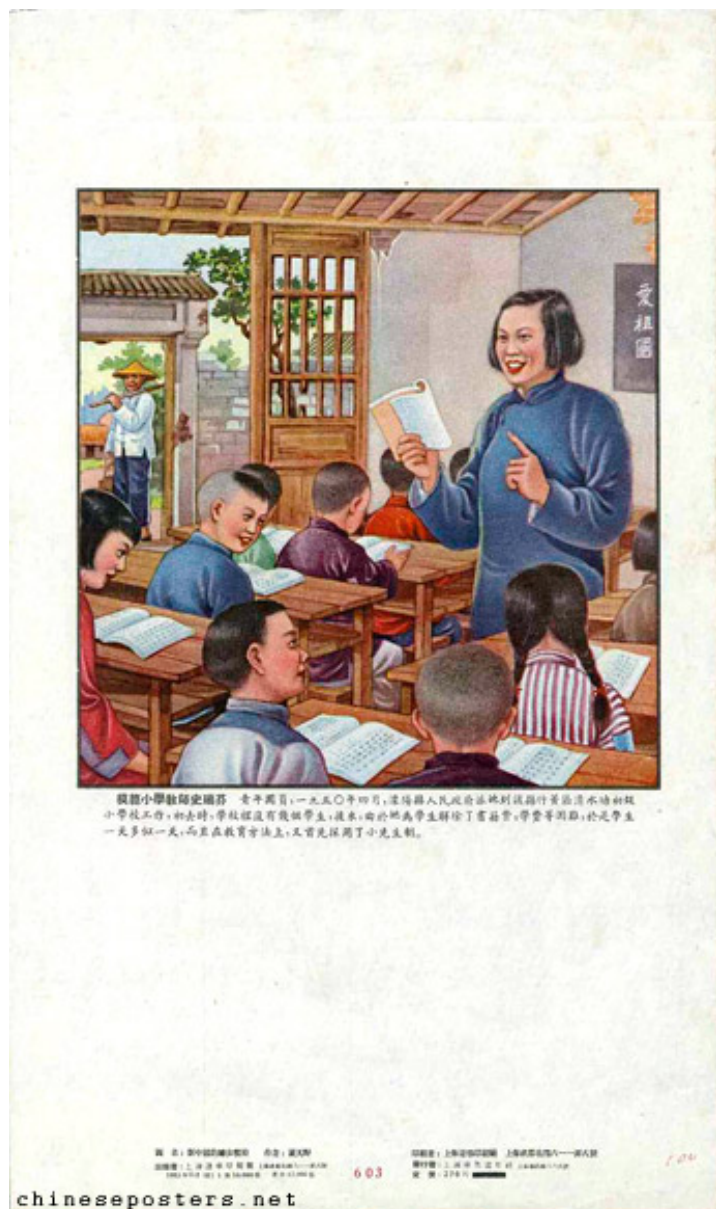
Source: Chineseposters.net.



Poster B-5: Unknown. (1953).

女旋盤手戚桂芝 [Female lathe worker Qi Guizhi].

Source: Chinese-posters.net.



Poster B-6: Unknown. (1953).

模範小學教師史瑞芬 [Model primary school teacher Shi Ruifen].

Source: Chineseposters.net.



Poster B-7: Unknown. (1953).

第一个女火车司机田桂英 [The first female train driver Tian Guiying].

Source: Chinese posters.net.



Poster B-8: Unknown. (1953).

創造科學工作法的郝建秀 [Hao Jianxiu, creator of a scientific work method].

Source: Chinese posters.net.



Poster B-9: Liu, Y., Qi, G., & Niu, W. (1953).

新中國給婦女開辟了一條無限寬廣的為祖國服務的道路! [New China has opened an infinitely broad road for women to serve the motherland!].

Source: Chinese-posters.net.



Poster B-10: Shu, Z., & Li, Y. (1982).

英姿颯爽 [Valiant and heroic bearing].

Source: Chinese-posters.net.



chinese posters . net

Poster B-11: Zhang, Y. (1955).

新中国的女跳伞员 [Female parachutists of New China].

Source: Chinese posters . net.



chinese posters . net

Poster B-12: Unknown. (1950s).

降落伞 [Parachute].

Source: Chinese posters . net.



Poster B-13a: Unknown. (n.d.)
Poster depicting Liu Hulan.
 Source: Cultural China.



Poster B-13b: Unknown. (n.d.)
Poster depicting Liu Hulan.
 Source: Cultural China.



Poster B-14a: Unknown. (n.d.).
Poster depicting Liu Hulan.
 Source: Cultural China.



Poster B-14a: Unknown. (n.d.).
Poster depicting Liu Hulan.
 Source: Cultural China.



Poster B-15: Qian, D. (1954).
 向人民英雄学习 [Learn from the
 people's heroes].
 Source: Chinese posters.net.



Poster B-16: Zhang, D.; Situ, H.
 (1955).
 在美术展览会上 [Meeting at the art
 exhibition].
 Source: Chinese posters.net.

C – Women as Caregivers



Poster C-1: Tao, T., & Lü, P. (1953).

工厂托儿所 [Factory nursery].

Source: Chinese posters.net.



Poster C-2: Wei, Y. (1953).

在幸福时代成长 [Growing up in a happy era].

Source: Chinese posters.net.



Poster C-3: Zhang, D. (1954).

民族和睦团结生产的新家庭

[A new family of ethnic harmony, unity, and production].

Source: Chinese posters.net.



Poster C-4: Xu, J. (1954).

让妈妈安心搞好生产

[Let mothers devote themselves to production with peace of mind].

Source: Chinese posters.net.



Poster C-5: Xu, J. (1954).

乘风破浪 各显神通 [Ride the wind and waves, each displaying their abilities].

Source: Chinese posters.net.



Poster C-6: Publicity Department of the Ministry of Health of the Central People's Government. (1954).
母亲和儿童受国家的保护 [Mothers and children are protected by the state].
Source: Chinese-posters.net.

D – Women Workers



Poster D-1: Xu, J. (1954).

新农村 [New countryside].

Source: Chinese-posters.net.



Poster D-2: Xu, J. (1954).

新农村 [New countryside].

Source: Chinese-posters.net.



Poster D-3: Xu, J. (1954).

女跳伞员 [Female parachutist].

Source: Chinese-posters.net.



Poster D-4: Zhang, Y. (1956).

造船厂的女焊工 [Female welders at the shipyard].

Source: Chinese posters.net.



Poster D-5: Ha, Q., & You, L. (1956).

提高技术，争取更大的节约！ [Improve techniques and strive for greater savings!].

Source: Chinese posters.net.



Poster D-6: You, L. (1955).

熱心為顧客服務 [Serve customers enthusiastically].

Source: Chinese-posters.net.



Poster D-7: Yan, J. (1953).

互助合作多打糧 - 家庭和睦好生產 [Mutual cooperation increases grain production; family harmony improves production].

Source: Chinese-posters.net.



Poster D-8: Yan, F. (1957).

丰收 [Harvest].

Source: Chinese posters.net.



Poster D-9: Unknown. (1977).

It makes me happy to contribute something to support agriculture.

Source: *Chinese Propaganda Posters: From the Collection of Michael Wolf.*



Poster D-10: Studio Group Art. (1977).
Workers and peasants join hands and advance.
Source: *Chinese Propaganda Posters: From the Collection of Michael Wolf.*

E – Young Women



Poster E-1: Li, M. (1965).

Two heroic sisters of the grassland.

*Source: Chinese Propaganda Posters:
From the Collection of Michael Wolf.*



Poster E-2: Wu, S. (1956).

Harvest.

*Source: Chinese Propaganda Posters: From the Collection of
Michael Wolf.*



Poster E-3: Wei, Y. (1954).

Ah! Another big apple!

Source: *Chinese Propaganda Posters: From the Collection of Michael Wolf.*



Poster E-4: Zhang, B. (1953).

We have accomplished it.

Source: *Chinese Propaganda Posters: From the Collection of Michael Wolf.*



Poster E-5: Mo, S. (1974).

读革命书，学革命人，当革命接班人

[Read revolutionary books, learn from revolutionary people, become successors to the revolution].

Source: *Chinese Propaganda Posters: From the Collection of Michael Wolf*.



Poster E-6: Ruqiao, Z. (1954).

把青春献给祖国

[Dedicate your youth to the Nation].

Source: Chinese posters . net.



E-7: Li, M. (1954)

经常运动,使身体强壮起来!

[Exercise regularly to keep your body strong]

Source: Chinese posters . net.

Appendix 2: Analysis Grid

Poster	What is this poster representing?	What is the scope of this poster?	What is it aiming to do?	What is this poster trying to provoke?	Elements	Levels of hierarchy	Colours	Textual elements	Anchoring (political and discursive)	Graphic elements and meanings		Emotions represented	Location of Mao's representation	Accompanying figures	Figures depicted in proximity to Mao	Named/Anonymous	Context of representation
										Index	Symbols						
A-1	A couple who has just registered their marriage	To represent how the free choice of partner generates a happy married life	To promote the principle of freedom of partner choice	Emancipation	Marriage certificate held by both members of the couple; red decoration on the chest; Marriage Law in the background; happy faces		Red, Pink	Caption: Freedom of marriage, complete blissful; Marriage Law	The freedom of partner choice promoted by the Marriage Law leads to a happy life		Red decoration -> fortune and good omen	Joy	-	-	-	A	N
A-2	A couple working in the fields. He holds a sickle while she holds a sheaf of wheat	To represent how the free choice of marriage contributes to improving agricultural production	To promote the principle of freedom of partner choice; to promote agricultural production	Emancipation; Participation	Agricultural elements (sickle, wheat)	The two figures are set in the background relative to the sleeves of wheat	Yellow; Pink; Blue	Caption: Freedom of marriage is good; harmonious production happiness is much	The freedom of partner choice promoted by the Marriage Law leads not only to happiness but also to more abundant production	Wheat and sickle → agricultural production		Joy	-	-	-	A	NC
A-3	A couple depicted twice. The husband first holds their son in his arms, then a book	To represent how a free and happy marriage also generates a better society made up of happy families	To represent good fortune and happiness	Personalisation		The two scenes are depicted in parallel	Red	Caption: Happy marriage, happy family	A happy marriage (such as the one presumably promoted by the CCP) generates happy families		Prominent use of red -> good omen	Joy	-	-	-	A	N
A-4	A couple travels seated on a cart. The woman holds a paper scroll tied with a red ribbon	To represent how the free choice of marriage generates happiness	A break with the old methods of the past (sorrowful) versus joy	Emancipation	Paper scroll (presumably a marriage certificate) -> understood through the accompanying description		Blue, Yellow, pink	Caption: Self-chosen marriage, filled with joy upon returning from registration	A self-chosen marriage generates a happy life	paper scroll -> marriage certificate (an interpretive key that would otherwise be unclear)		Joy	-	-	-	A	N
A-5	A couple is at a public office to register their marriage with a public official. Around them stands a group of other people.	To promote marriage registration	To promote free and independent marriage as a value of the CCP (note the figure of Mao, the official in uniform, and the revolutionaries' satchel)	Emancipation	Scroll with inscription -> promotion of free marriage; image of Mao -> symbol of the Party	The figure of Mao is positioned above that of all other citizens	Blue, Red, Yellow	Caption: Marriage registration; hanging scroll: free and independent marriage	Free marriage is a value of the Party		Image of Mao -> symbol of the Party and its values; red garment -> good omen	Joy	Above all other figures	no one	Citizens of all ages, men and women	A	N
A-6	A young man wears a hat for working in the fields and carries a hoe and a rifle, holding a letter in his hand. A young	To promote participation and commitment to the social revolution above all else	To indicate that the priority should be contributing to the collective above all else;	Emancipation; Participation	Hoe and rifle -> revolution and field labour; test tubes and microscope -> study and	The young man is depicted above the young woman	Blue, Pink, Yellow	Caption: Marrying later has many advantages	Marriage should not be the priority; progress and social revolution come first (freed from	Hoe and rifle -> labour and revolution; laboratory objects ->		-	-	-	-	A	NC

Poster	What is this poster representing?	What is the scope of this poster?	What is it aiming to do?	What is this poster trying to provoke?	Elements	Levels of hierarchy	Colours	Textual elements	Anchoring (caption and political discourse)	Graphic elements and meanings		Emotions represented	Location of Mao's representation	Accompanying figures	Figures depicted in proximity to Mao	Named/Anonymous	Context of representation
										Index	Symbols						
	woman is studying science, seated at a desk on which there are books and notebooks, a stalk of grain, some flasks, and a microscope		even above marriage		scientific progress				family commitments, one can devote oneself to study and progress)	study and progress							
A-7	A woman holds a red book and a hoe; behind her, smaller figures (mostly women) are engaged in various activities (studying science, driving, and working)	For young people, revolution must come before marriage	Citizens' priority should be the socialist values of Maoism (red book) and labour for the collective (hoe)	Emancipation; Participation	Hoe -> labour for the collective; book -> progress	The woman is depicted in the foreground and in greater detail than the other figures	Pink		Marriage should not be the priority; progress and social revolution come first (freed from family commitments, one can devote oneself to study and progress)	Hoe -> labour	red book -> values of communism	Hope				A	NC
A-8	A group of young men and women advance smiling. A woman drives a tractor, a man wears work clothes, two young men hold rifles, a young woman holds a red cloth, and two young women hold a map(?) and a measuring tape	For young people, revolution must come before marriage	For young people, revolution must come before marriage	Enancipation; Participation	Rifle and uniform -> revolution; tractor -> economic progress;	Young soldiers at the top, young farmers in the middle, young readers at the bottom	Red, Pink	Caption (in all official languages of the PRC): Actively respond to the Party's call. Promote marriage at an appropriate age and devote your youth to the great socialist revolution and to the work of national construction; text on the sheet: Long-term planning of the People's Commune	The values of revolution and of building the new nation must be young people's priorities, above the values of the past (marriage)		tractor -> symbol of economic progress; rifles -> symbol of revolution; measuring tape and map -> symbol of planning for the future; sun -> symbol of the values of the CCP	Joy				A	NC
A-9	A group of young people beneath a cherry tree. One young woman holds a hoe, another wears a miner's helmet, and another holds a mathematics book	For young people, revolution must come before marriage	For young people, revolution must come before marriage	Enancipation; Participation	Hoe -> labour for the collective; book -> progress		Red; pink	Caption: Mary later for the revolution	The values of revolution and of building the new nation must be young people's priorities, above the values of the	Hoe -> labour for the collective; book ->	progress; flying swallows and flowers -> freedom; red element at the centre -> good omen	Joy and Hope				A	NC

Poster	What is this poster representing?	What is the scope of this poster?	What is it aiming to do?	What is this poster trying to provoke?	Elements	Levels of hierarchy	Colours	Textual elements	Anchoring (caption and political discourse)	Graphic elements and meanings		Emotions represented	Location of Mao's representation	Accompanying figures	Figures depicted in proximity to Mao	Named/Anonymous	Context of representation
										Index	Symbols						
A-10	A couple holds hands. Behind them, a path leads towards a radiant sun. In a lower register, several scenes of everyday life are depicted	To promote the Marriage Law		Participation	Sun --> radiant future	The couple above, scenes of everyday life below	Yellow, Pink, Blue	Caption: Support the marriage Law	The Marriage Law and the well-being it generates must be defended by citizens	Path, sun	Path and sun --> bright future	Joy and Hope	-	-	-	A	N
B-1	In the foreground, a young woman dressed in a blue uniform holds a bunch of flowers. Behind her, a group of all people of all ages and genders wave their hands, presumably in greeting; some of them are also holding flowers.	To exalt the value of exemplary female citizens	To promote the Party's values through exemplary figures	Moralisation-mythmaking (morally superior individuals)	Flowers --> reward for merit; uniform --> symbol of the Party's values	The young woman is in the foreground	Blue, Red and pink (flowers)	Caption: mostly illegible; young Zhao Guilan (who died in a factory accident)	Zhao Guilan's worth is acknowledged by all --> flowers	Flowers --> reward for merit;	Uniform --> symbol of the Party's values	Honour	-	-	-	N	NC
B-2	In the foreground, a woman wears farming attire and drives a tractor across a field. In the background, other workers and a city with factories in operation	To exalt the courage, emancipation, and active participation of female citizens in production	To promote active participation	Participation; Moralisation-mythmaking	Tractor	The woman is in the foreground	Green, red	Caption: mostly illegible, probably a description of the protagonist 梁军 Liang Jun, the first female tractor driver in China	The Party promotes female citizens' courage in stepping outside "old" gender patterns through activities once regarded as strictly male	Tractor --> symbol of progress and labour		Pride	-	-	-	N	NC
B-3	A woman wears a military uniform and holds a rifle. Behind her, other soldiers, likewise armed with firearms. The setting is outdoors.	To exalt the courage, emancipation, and military valour of female citizens	To promote emancipation and military participation	Participation; Moralisation-mythmaking	Uniform and rifle; medals	The woman is in the foreground	Green; brown	Caption: mostly illegible, probably a description of the protagonist 涂勤 Tu Xin, a young female soldier	The Party promotes female citizens' courage in stepping outside "old" gender patterns through activities once regarded as strictly male	Rifle --> military engagement; medals --> military valour	Uniform --> engagement in the revolution	Honour	-	-	-	N	NC
B-4	A woman on horseback wears a military uniform.	To exalt the courage, emancipation, and military valour of female citizens	To promote emancipation and military participation	Participation; Moralisation-mythmaking	Uniform and horse; medals	The woman is in the foreground	Green; brown	Caption: mostly illegible, probably a description of the protagonist 郭修卿 Guo	The Party promotes female citizens' courage in stepping outside "old" gender	Horse --> military engagement; medals --> military valour	Uniform --> engagement in the revolution	Honour	-	-	-	N	NC

Poster	What is this poster representing?	What is the scope of this poster?	What is it aiming to do?	What is this poster trying to provoke?	Elements	Levels of hierarchy	Colours	Textual elements	Anchoring (caption and political discourse)	Graphic elements and meanings		Emotions represented	Location of Mao's representation	Accompanying figures	Figures depicted in proximity to Mao	Named/Anonymous	Context of representation
										Index	Symbols						
								Junjing, a young female military heroine	patterns through activities once regarded as strictly male								
B-5	A woman wears work overalls and is working with machinery in a factory.	To exalt the industriousness of female citizens	To promote active participation	Participation; Moralisation; mythmaking	Machinery	The woman is in the foreground relative to another worker	Green	Caption: mostly illegible, probably a description of the protagonist 戚桂芝 Qi Guizhi, a young spinner	-	Machinery -> industries and active contribution to production		Commitment	-			N	NC
B-6	A woman holding a book is presumably teaching something to children. In the background, a man wearing a hat and presumably holding a work tool watches the scene, smiling.	To exalt the industriousness of female citizens	To promote active participation	Participation; Moralisation; mythmaking	Book	The woman is in the foreground and in an elevated position relative to the other figures	Blue	Caption: mostly illegible, probably a eulogy for 史瑞芬 Shi Ruifen, a primary school teacher at Qingshihuang		Book -> the value of teaching		Joy				N	C
B-7	A woman wears a train driver's uniform; beside her, a steam locomotive	To exalt the courage, emancipation, and active participation of female citizens	To promote active participation	Participation; Moralisation; mythmaking	Locomotive		Brown; Blue; Grey	Caption: mostly illegible, probably a eulogy for 田桂英 Tian Guiying, the first female train driver in China	The Party promotes female citizens' courage in stepping outside "old" gender patterns through activities once regarded as strictly male	Train -> progress		Joy and pride	-			N	NC
B-8	A young woman is in a textile factory. She wears a checked shirt and a white apron	To exalt the value of exemplary female citizens	To promote the Party's values through exemplary figures	Moralisation; mythmaking (morally superior individuals)	Apron -> symbol of factory work	The young woman is in the foreground	White	Caption: mostly illegible; eulogy for the young Hao Jianxu		Apron -> symbol of labour		Joy				N	NC
B-9	A woman wears an aviator's uniform. Behind her, several warplanes and a group of other aviators	To encourage the active participation of female citizens and their emancipation into roles outside traditional gender patterns	To promote active participation	Emancipation; Participation	Warplane and aviator's helmet -> symbols of struggle and emancipation	The young woman is in the foreground, underscoring the opening of new possibilities for women to serve the nation	Brown, Green	Caption: New China has opened up an infinitely broad path for women to serve the motherland!	The Communist Party offers female citizens many new opportunities, far more than in the past (broad path)	Aeroplane and goggles -> symbol of struggle		Pride	-			A	NC

Poster	What is this poster representing?	What is the scope of this poster?	What is it aiming to do?	What is this poster trying to provoke?	Elements	Levels of hierarchy	Colours	Textual elements	Anchoring (caption and political discourse)	Graphic elements and meanings		Emotions represented	Location of Mao's representation	Accompanying figures	Figures depicted in proximity to Mao	Named/Anonymous	Context of representation
										Index	Symbols						
B-10	Four women are depicted engaged in various activities	To promote female emancipation in activities once considered unconventional	To promote emancipation	Emancipation	Uniforms, a ball, a rifle, and binoculars	The four women occupy the same hierarchical level	Green	英姿飒爽 (Bold and brave)	The Party promotes female citizens' courage in stepping outside "old" gender patterns through activities once regarded as strictly male	Uniforms, rifle, and binoculars -> symbol of (male-associated) activities	Soldier's uniform -> engagement in the revolution	Bravery				A	NC
B-11	Two women dressed as aviators are acclaimed by a crowd	To exalt the courage, emancipation, and active participation of female citizens in the revolution	To promote the value of courageous female citizens	Participation	Uniforms, parachutes, flowers, and flags	The women are positioned above the crowd	Red, brown, blue and green	Caption: the (female) parachutists of New China	New China -> flag; parachutists -> parachute and uniforms	Flowers -> reward for merit; uniform -> participation in the revolution; aeroplane and numerous parachutes -> numerous opportunities	Flag -> values of the revolution and New China	Bravery; acclamation	-			A	NC
B-12	In the foreground, a female parachutist wears an aviator's uniform and holds a backpack in her arms; in the background, numerous parachutes	To encourage the active participation of female citizens and their emancipation into roles outside traditional gender patterns	To promote active participation	Emancipation; Participation	Uniform and parachutes	The woman is prominently visible in the foreground	Brown, Green	-	-	Uniform -> active participation in the revolution; numerous parachutes -> symbol of the numerous possibilities offered to women (warfare and parachuting being activities regarded as strictly "male")	Bravery; acclamation	Pride	-			A	NC
B-13a	The image is divided into two parts: in the upper section, the close-up face of a young woman is depicted; in the lower section, the young woman stands with a proud expression on a stage(?), with other figures around her in the background	To promote the heroic value of female citizens	To promote the heroic value of female citizens	Participation; Moralisation; mythmaking		The close-up of the young woman's face is depicted in detail above the scene; within the scene, the young woman is at the centre	Blue	Caption: partially illegible, 刘胡兰 Liu Hulan, Chinese revolutionary heroine: Liu Hulan, an outstanding member of the Communist Party, was from Yunzhou Village in	The Party promotes the courage and worth of female citizens in the revolution			Pride				N	N

Poster	What is this poster representing?	What is the scope of this poster?	What is it aiming to do?	What is this poster trying to provoke?	Elements	Levels of hierarchy	Colours	Textual elements	Anchoring (caption and political discourse)	Graphic elements and meanings			Emotions represented	Location of Mao's representation	Accompanying figures	Figures depicted in proximity to Mao	Named/Anonymous	Context of representation
										Index	Symbols							
								Wenshui County, Shanxi Province. She served as secretary of the village Women's Association and actively mobilized the masses to support the War of Liberation. In January 1947, enemy forces attacked Yunzhouxi. In order to protect Party funds, she remained firm under interrogation. Faced with the enemy, she showed unyielding courage and was ultimately executed, demonstrating the noble qualities of a Communist Party member. Mao Zedong once praised her, saying: "A great life, a glorious death," to honor her sacrifice.										
B-13b	The image is divided into two parts: in the upper section, the close-up face of a young woman is depicted; in the lower section, the young woman stands with a proud expression while weapons are pointed at her. Other figures	To promote the heroic value of female citizens	To promote the heroic value of female citizens	Participation; Moralisation; mythmaking		The close-up of the young woman's face is depicted in detail above the scene; within the scene, the young woman is at the centre	BW	Caption: Liu Hulan, from Yunzhouxi Village, Wenshui County, Shanxi Province, was born on October 8, 1932. In June 1946, she secretly joined the Chinese Communist	The Party promotes the courage and worth of female citizens in the revolution	Weapons --> enemy threat	Pride	-	-				N	N

Poster	What is this poster representing?	What is the scope of this poster?	What is it aiming to do?	What is this poster trying to provoke?	Elements	Levels of hierarchy	Colours	Textual elements	Anchoring (caption and political discourse)	Graphic elements and meanings			Emotions represented	Location of Mao's representation	Accompanying figures	Figures depicted in proximity to Mao	Named/Anonymous	Context of representation				
	appear around her in the background							<p>Party as a probationary member. She successively served as secretary of the village Women's Association and as a cadre in the district women's committee.</p> <p>On January 12, 1947, during the advance of Yan Xishan's troops, she was arrested and bravely faced the enemy.</p> <p>During her lifetime, Liu Hulan showed boundless loyalty to the cause of liberating the people. In the front of the enemy, she remained steadfast and unyielding, demonstrating the noble qualities of a Communist Party member.</p> <p>On August 1, 1947, the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party posthumously recognized Liu Hulan as a full Party member. Mao Zedong personally inscribed the words: "A great life, a glorious death," praising her</p>		Index	Symbols											

Poster	What is this poster representing?	What is the scope of this poster?	What is it aiming to do?	What is this poster trying to provoke?	Elements	Levels of hierarchy	Colours	Textual elements	Anchoring (caption and political discourse)	Graphic elements and meanings		Emotions represented	Location of Mao's representation	Accompanying figures	Figures depicted in proximity to Mao	Named/Anonymous	Context of representation
										Index	Symbols						
								short yet brilliant life.									
B-14a	A young woman wears a red jacket; in the background, a snowy landscape	To promote the heroic value of female citizens	To promote the heroic value of female citizens	Moralisation-mythmaking	red jacket		Red	Caption: mostly illegible, possibly a eulogy for 刘胡兰 Liu Hulan, Chinese revolutionary heroine who died a "martyr" for the revolution	The Party promotes the courage and worth of female citizens in the revolution		Red jacket -> engagement with the communist revolution	Pride	-	-	-	N	N
B-14b	A young woman wears a dark shirt and is positioned at the centre of the image	To promote the heroic value of female citizens	To promote the heroic value of female citizens	Moralisation-mythmaking	-	The young woman is in the foreground relative to the other figures	Black	Caption: illegible, probably a commendation of Liu Hulan (family legible), Chinese revolutionary heroine who died a "martyr" for the revolution	-	-	-	Pride	-	-	-	N	N
B-15	A young girl and a young boy in school uniform hold books; the girl points to a statue in the background, while the boy looks at the statue and listens to the girl	To promote the heroic value of female citizens	To promote the heroic value of female citizens	Participation; Moralisation-mythmaking	Statue -> commended value	The statue is in the background but occupies a hierarchically elevated position relative to the children	Red; white; golden	Caption: Let us learn from the heroes of the people	The Party promotes its own values through exemplary figures who have distinguished themselves	Book, statue	Statue -> indicates the worth of the figure (Liu Hulan) and what she should represent for posterity Red book -> held close to the heart, signalling closeness to the Party's values (embodied by the colour red)	Pride	-	-	-	U	N
B-16	A statue at the centre of a room is observed by numerous citizens of every gender and age	To promote the heroic value of female citizens	To promote the heroic value of female citizens	Participation; Moralisation-mythmaking	Statue -> commended value	The statue occupies a hierarchically elevated position relative to the observers	White, Red, Green	-	-	Statue	Statue -> indicates the worth of the figure (Liu Hulan) and what she should represent for posterity	Honour	-	-	-	U	N
C-1	The setting is a nursery/childcare centre. Several nurses/careers are looking after a number of children	To promote female participation in labour and production	To promote female participation in labour and production	Personalisation; Emancipation	Image of Mao	The image of Mao is positioned above all the figures	White	Sign: Take good care of the children so that mothers can work with peace of mind; caption at the bottom left: factory nursery	The Party cares for children with the same love as a family		Mao picture -> values of the Party	Joy	Above all other figures	alone	Young caregivers and children	A	C

Poster	What is this poster representing?	What is the scope of this poster?	What is it aiming to do?	What is this poster trying to provoke?	Elements	Levels of hierarchy	Colours	Textual elements	Anchoring (caption and political discourse)	Graphic elements and meanings		Emotions represented	Location of Mao's representation	Accompanying figures	Figures depicted in proximity to Mao	Named/Anonymous	Context of representation
										Index	Symbols						
C-2	A mother holds her child in her arms; beside her stands another daughter holding a red book. In the background, a panoramic wheel and a building are depicted	To represent how families are happy in the new Chinese society	To promote the idea of a happy society	Personalisation	Red book		Blue; Red;	Caption: mostly illegible		red book	red book --> values of communism as a pillar of the child's upbringing	Joy	-	-	-	A	C
C-3	A happy family consisting of a mother holding a child in her arms. The child is passing from the mother's arms into the grandmother's. On the right, a father holds a hoe. Below, another child observes the scene. Above all the figures is the image of Mao	To represent how families are happy in the new Chinese society	To promote the idea of a happy society under the Party's values	Personalisation	Hoe; image of Mao	The image of Mao is above all the figures; the child is at the centre	Green; Pink	-	-	Image of Mao	Image of Mao --> symbol of the Party and its values, which permeate homes and happy families	Joy	Above all other figures	alone	A happy family	A	C
C-4	A mother holds a child in her arms; beside her, three other happy children. In the background, factories in operation	To represent well-being in the new Chinese society: happy families and active production	To promote the idea of a happy society under the Party's values	Personalisation	Toys; image in the background	The woman is positioned above all the other children	Red; White; pink	Caption: mostly illegible	-	-	-	Joy	-	-	-	A	C
C-5	Numerous figures engage in various activities (mostly related to agricultural work) while riding a wave at sea	To represent progress brought about by the revolution and agricultural production as a wave, and how the people are happy	To promote the idea of a prosperous society	Personalisation; Participation	Various agricultural elements (tractor, wheat), a rocket, and flags		Red	Caption: Ride the wind and break the waves; each displays their special abilities	Everyone must actively participate in the country's economy		Agricultural elements --> progress and active production	Joy	-	-	-	A	NC
C-6	Two female figures hold a swaddled infant in their arms. Behind them, a circle containing Mao's profile	To represent how the Party cares for its citizens (an implicit parallel with the caregivers and the child)	To promote the idea of the Party-State as a loving family	Personalisation	Figure of Mao; red bow	The figure of Mao is above all; the red bow is at the centre	Red; white	Caption: Mothers and children are protected by the state.	The Party cares for all its citizens and protects the most vulnerable	Bow; figure of Mao	Red bow --> implicit connection to the Party; figure of Mao --> overseer	Joy; serenity	Above all other figures	alone	Happy people	A	C

Poster	What is this poster representing?	What is the scope of this poster?	What is it aiming to do?	What is this poster trying to provoke?	Elements	Levels of hierarchy	Colours	Textual elements	Anchoring (caption and political discourse)	Graphic elements and meanings		Emotions represented	Location of Mao's representation	Accompanying figures	Figures depicted in proximity to Mao	Named/Anonymous	Context of representation
										Index	Symbols						
D-1	The image is divided into two parts. On the right, a young woman is depicted holding a shovel in a rice paddy; on the left, a young woman is depicted in a wheat field, wearing gloves, next to a canister presumably containing herbicide or another agricultural chemical product, with a tractor visible behind her in the background.	To promote the value of peasants	Addressing peasants	Emancipation	Spade and canister	The two images are symmetrical	Green, yellow	Caption: New countryside	The Party promotes progress in rural areas	Spade --> symbol of agricultural labour; canister and tractor --> symbol of progress in rural areas		Joy	-	-		A	NC
D-2	The image is divided into two parts. On the right, a young woman in a field is picking cotton, with a sack of chemical fertiliser beside her; on the left, a young woman in a field holds a bag of tools, while in the background men are fitting electrical cables onto a pylon	To promote progress in rural areas	To demonstrate how the new China brings progress even to rural areas	Emancipation	Basket and pylon	The two images are symmetrical	Green, brown	Caption: New countryside; sack: chemical fertiliser	The Party promotes progress in rural areas	Sack and pylon --> symbol of progress in rural areas		Joy	-	-		A	NC
D-3	Three female parachutists at the centre of the image are (presumably) being acclaimed once after landing. In the background, numerous parachutes	To promote female emancipation in activities once considered unconventional	To promote emancipation and military participation	Emancipation; Participation	Parachutes	The female figures are in the foreground	Green; red; blue	Caption: Parachutists	The Party promotes female emancipation in activities conventionally reserved for men		Numerous parachutes -> numerous opportunities for women	Joy, acclamation	-	-		A	NC
D-4	Two female welders are welding a pipe. In the background, other workers are carrying out similar welding work	To promote female emancipation in activities once considered unconventional	To promote emancipation	Emancipation	Welding equipment	The female figures are in the foreground	White, brown	Caption: shipyard welders	The Party promotes female emancipation in activities conventionally reserved for men	Welding equipment -> technological and industrial progress		Joy	-	-		A	NC

Poster	What is this poster representing?	What is the scope of this poster?	What is it aiming to do?	What is this poster trying to provoke?	Elements	Levels of hierarchy	Colours	Textual elements	Anchoring (caption and political discourse)	Graphic elements and meanings		Emotions represented	Location of Mao's representation	Accompanying figures	Figures depicted in proximity to Mao	Named/Anonymous	Context of representation
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D-5	Two women are working in a textile factory; one is noting something down in a notebook, the other holds a small bag. Beside them, machinery for processing cotton. In the background, a large piece of machinery and another worker	To promote female participation in labour; to promote technological progress in industry	To promote female participation in labour and production	Emancipation; Participation	Machinery	The female figures are in the foreground	Red, white, green	Caption: Improve technical skills and strive for greater savings; text on the apron: partially illegible, probably the worker's name; poster above: increase quality, save cotton, consume, [...]	The Party promotes technological progress in industrial production		Machinery -> technological progress	Joy	-	-	-	A	NC
D-6	A woman is showing a floral-patterned fabric to an elderly woman holding a child in her arms	To promote the idea of a happy society	To promote the idea of a happy society	Emancipation	Fabric		Red, white	Caption: Be enthusiastic toward customers	The Party promotes the idea of a happy society			Joy	-	-	-	A	C
D-7	The image is divided into two parts. Peasants are depicted in both halves. In the lower section of the left half, agricultural produce is depicted; in the right half, animals are depicted	To promote the idea of a happy society as linked to agricultural production and well-being	Happy society = economic progress and well-being	Emancipation; Participation	Agricultural tools; animals; flag; red book	The figures of the peasants are larger than the produce and the animals	Red; yellow	Caption: Cooperate with each other [to] produce more grain; with family harmony comes increased production; text below: partially illegible, A bountiful harvest of grains; text below: peace and health throughout the four seasons.	The Party promotes the idea of a happy society as a source of economic well-being (happiness = progress)	Agricultural tools -> farm labour; agricultural produce and animals -> abundance in agricultural production; doves -> possible serenity	Flag and red book -> values of Communism -Maoism	Joy	-	-	-	A	N
D-8	Two young women are portrayed harvesting/worki ng wheat. In the background, a hut with several peasants	To promote female participation in labour and production	To promote active participation	Participation	Machinery	The female figures are in the foreground	Yellow; Pink; Blue	-	-	Machinery -> technological progress and production		Joy	-	-	-	A	NC
D-9	A young woman is working as a postal courier and delivers a mechanical tool to a female citizen. Beside	To promote female participation in labour	To promote active participation	Participation	Moped and machinery	The female figures are in the foreground	Green; pink; yellow	-	-	Scooter -> progress		Joy	-	-	-	A	NC

Poster	What is this poster representing?	What is the scope of this poster?	What is it aiming to do?	What is this poster trying to provoke?	Elements	Levels of hierarchy	Colours	Textual elements	Anchoring (caption and political discourse)	Graphic elements and meanings		Emotions represented	Location of Mao's representation	Accompanying figures	Figures depicted in proximity to Mao	Named/Anonymous	Context of representation
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	her, a scooter/moped. In the background, numerous figures.																
D-10	Two female figures at the centre of the image hold hands. In the background, a truck and a car	To promote cooperation and participation	To promote cooperation among social groups	Personalisation ; Participation		The focal point of attention falls on the hands	Red	Caption: Workers and peasants join hands and march forward.	workers and peasants must collaborate for the progress of all			Joy	-	-	-	A	N
E-1	Two young women are depicted at the centre of the image with their right hand raised, open above the forehead. In the background, two shepherds with sheep	To represent young female citizens	To represent young women loyal to the Party's values	Participation	Neckerchief	The young women are in the foreground	Red; Pink; Yellow	-	-		Red neckerchief -> implicit symbol of Communism	Pride	-	-	-	A	N
E-2	Two young girls and a young boy are picking vegetables in a garden. In the background, a woman hands a vegetable to a young girl.	To represent the active participation of everyone, including children	To promote active participation	Participation	Vegetables	The young girls are in the foreground relative to the young boy and the other figures	Red	-	-	Red vegetables, red little dresses, red flowers	The presence of red --> implicit connection to the Party	Joy	-	-	-	A	N
E-3	A group of children is picking fruit/vegetables in a field. Around them, several animals. They are gathered beneath an apple tree.	To represent the new Chinese society as happy	To represent the new Chinese society as happy	Personalisation	Vegetables and animals; red apples	The apples are above the children	Red	-	-	Vegetables and animals -> values of agricultural society	Red apples -> implicit connection to the Party watching over its citizens (they are positioned above them)	Joy	-	-	-	A	N
E-4	Two young girls and a young boy are using a telephone.	To represent progress	To represent how progress generates a happy society	Personalisation ; Emancipation	Red neckerchiefs	the telephone is the focal point of the scene	Red; pink	-	-	Telephone and neckerchief	Telephone -> symbol of progress	Joy	-	-	-	A	N
E-5	A young woman holds a book. Behind her, four figures engage in various actions.	To promote heroic value and engagement in the revolution	To motivate female citizens	Participation; Moralisation-mythmaking	Book	The young woman is at the centre of the image. The focal point of attention falls on the book	Red; yellow	Caption: Read revolutionary books, learn from revolutionary role models, and become successors to the revolutionary	The Party promotes its own values through exemplary figures who have distinguished themselves as role models	book, figures in the background	Book and figures in the background -> exemplary figures embodying the Party's values (Lei Feng and Liu	Pride				A	NC

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								cause; book title: The Story of Lei Feng	for young female citizens			Hulan are recognisable)						
E-6	Two women are in a mountain landscape. They carry mountaineering equipment with them	To promote nationalism	To motivate female citizens	Participation	Hiking equipment		White; Blue; Green	Caption: Be enthusiastic toward customers	The Party promotes nationalism	Hiking equipment			Joy	-	-	-	A	NC
E-7	A young girl skips rope in a field. Other children play sports behind her	To promote a happy lifestyle	To motivate female citizens	Participation; Personalisation	Jumping rope	The young girl is at the centre of the image.	White, pink, Green	Caption: Exercise regularly to keep your body strong	The Party promotes its own values regarding physical fitness	Jumping rope			Joy	-	-	-	A	N

Appendix 3: Declaration of the Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) Tools

The undersigned Salvatore Alessandro Rafaraci, student ID number 888621, enrolled at Ca' Foscari University of Venice in the Master's Degree program in "Languages, Economics and Institutions of Asia and North Africa (Lingue, Economie e Istituzioni dell'Asia e dell'Africa Mediterranea)", author of the thesis "The Image of the New Woman: Propaganda Posters and the Making of the New Socialist Woman in Maoist China" supervisor Dayton Joseph Lekner and assistant supervisor Laura De Giorgi, being aware of the sanctions provided for by Art. 76 of the Consolidated Act, Presidential Decree 28/12/2000 No. 445, and of the forfeiture of benefits provided for by Art. 75 of the same Consolidated Act in the case of false or misleading statements, under personal responsibility pursuant to Articles 46 and 47 of Presidential Decree 28/12/2000 No. 445,

DECLARES

that they made use of generative artificial intelligence technologies to support various aspects of the research and writing of their final thesis, specifically Claude AI Sonnet 5 and ChatGPT-5.

- provide information on how the tool was used:
 - review and optimization of the text to improve clarity and coherence;
 - support in the search for sources

- sections and Chapters involved:

Introduction, Methods, Chapter 1, Chapter 2, Chapter 3, Chapter 4, Results and Discussion

The texts were entirely re-read and reworked before being included in the dissertation.

FURTHER DECLARES

that all material generated by AI was carefully verified, reviewed, and reworked by the author, who assumes full responsibility for the quality, accuracy, and scientific integrity of the work.

